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When sly Curly Conliss comes to the town of Painted Post to "invest," a pair of suspicious lawmen do some six-gun banking that clears up a troublesome account or two! 13

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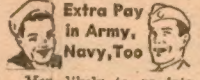

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The HOME CORRAL

A DEPARTMENT FOR READERS

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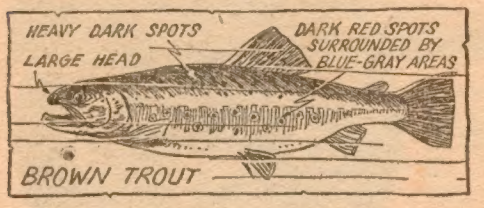
OLD DOC TRAIL

HOWDY, hombres and hombresses! How you gettin' along with your out-West fishing lessons? You regular Home Corralers who saved up our present chats better keep 'em handy, because one o' these days we might hold an examination.

One of our recent get-togethers had mainly to do with a description of the appearance, habits and distribution of the three principal trout and troutlike fishes of western waters.



Namely, the rainbow, cutthroat and Eastern brook.

So in this pow-wow let's take up the remainder of the 14 which are as follows:

Brown trout, Loch Leven, Dolly Varden and Mackinaw. Also the steelhead, harvest trout, silverside, grayling, whitefish, jack salmon and chinook salmon.

Let's Wade In

In cataloguing these fish thuswise I'm at odds with the rules laid down by the science of ichthyology. But what I'm aiming to do is to classify our seven western trout and seven troutlike fish in a way that doesn't bedazzle and confuse the average person. And as I go along I figure to explain to you things that the "experts" don't touch on.

So now let's wade into our subject:

BROWN TROUT—This fast-growing but slow-moving fish was imported from Europe more than a half-century ago and is sometimes called the German brown. Instead of being silvery, like our rainbow, it is a sort of olive shade, merging to yellowish sides and belly with large dull-red and black spots. The head is longer and larger than the rainbow's.

He's a good fly-taker but is generally found in waters of a higher temperature than the rainbow likes. He has a habit of lying along overgrown banks and when hooked will head for roots and tangles.

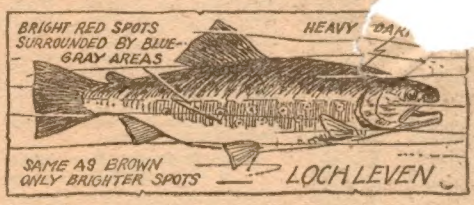
While lacking the fighting ability of the rainbow in the open riffles, the brown has plenty of tricks. He grows faster—up to pound size in his first season. Most of the prize big fish taken in various contests are browns. A recent first prize taker, caught in the Big Hole River of Montana, weighed more than 16 pounds.

Sportsmen don't agree as to the value of the brown. Some claim he's strongly cannibalistic and depredates small fry. Others point out that the brown populates waters where other species don't thrive, thus increasing our fish resources. Perhaps both arguments are true. For that matter, all trout are cannibalistic when they reach maturity.

Science Disagrees

Science also disagrees in naming this fish, which is classified as *salmo fario* and also *salmo eriox*. Some "experts" declare that it is the same fish as *salmo levensis* or—

LOCH LEVEN—As the name implies, this trout was introduced from Scotland



As a rule, its red spots are brighter than those of the brown, which are more of a maroon shade. It more closely resembles the Eastern brook, but lacks the vermiculations or worm-like markings on the back.

It's been my observation that in cold, fast creeks the Loch Leven proves himself inferior to the native rainbow. Being less active and adventurous, he cannot or will not risk rapids and falls to reach the best feeding areas. He gets locked in a pool or pothole and goes thin and hungry. In such environment, his condition factor is lower than the rainbow's. Where a 14-inch rainbow will weigh a full pound, Loch Leven weigh 12 to 14 ounces and are big-headed and snaky-built.

The Dolly Varden

Later on I'll show you how the weight-length ratio proves the condition factor by a

(Continued on page 10)

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For every time you buy a Bond, you not only help finance the War. You help to build up a vast reserve of postwar buying power. Buying power that can mean millions of postwar jobs making billions of dollars' worth of postwar goods and a healthy, prosperous, strong America in which there'll be a richer, happier living for every one of us.

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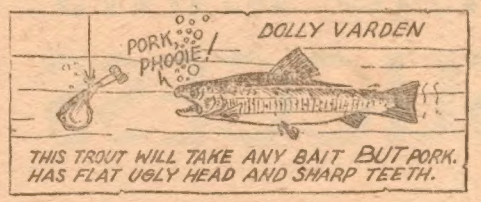
THE HOME CORRAL

(Continued from page 6)

simple mathematical table. But let's skip that just now and go on to the—

DOLLY VARDEN—Here's a varmint that grows to 40 pounds, huge ones often being found in creeks you can jump across. The



Dolly resembles the brown trout, but has a flat, ugly head that gives him the name, bull trout.

He has strong, sharp teeth and in such rivers as the Columbia travels to salt water, coming far inland in the summer months to prey on the eggs and spawn of other trout. Not only is the Dolly Varden strongly cannibalistic but he is a scavenger, taking dead minnows or almost any kind of cut bait *EXCEPT* pork.

He's considered a bad hombre by most sportsmen and in some localities, such as along the Metolius River in Oregon, is destroyed with pitchforks and bullets.

The Dolly lurks on the bottom of deep pools and is a sluggish fighter. He is not a surface feeder and refuses to rise to the I never have heard of a Dolly being cat on a fly.

Yet here is what one oft-quoted "expert" has to say on the subject:

"None of the salmon-trouts or charrs rises

(Continued on page 76)

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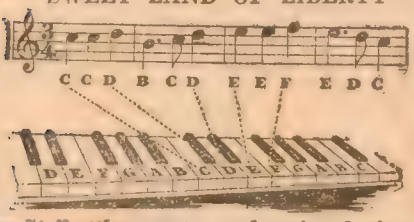

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Our illustrated Free Booklet fully explains this remarkable course. It shows how you can learn to play quickly, and for a mere fraction of the cost of old, slow methods. So decide which instrument you want to play and mail the coupon today. The fascinating Free Booklet will be sent to you at once together with a "Print and Picture" Sample. U. S. School of Music, 2945 Brunswick Bldg., New York 10, N. Y.

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THE CACTUS PHANTOM

By TOM GUNN

When sly Curly Conliss comes to the town of Painted Post to "invest," a pair of suspicious lawmen do some six-gun banking that clears up a troublesome account or two!

CHAPTER I

Desert Diplomat

IT WAS a typical example of Arizona humor that a man such as Conliss, who was completely bald and baby-skinned, should be called "Curly." This Curly Conliss was a smooth customer in more ways than one. Besides being as hairless as a Mexican Chihuahua dog, even to his eyelids, he was slick-tongued as any politician.

Politics actually was Curly Conliss' profession. He had put over several shady land deals at Tucson at recent sessions of the Territorial Legislature and made a potful of money in contracting to build roads that never were traveled upon except by flies and spiders on the wall maps of some county surveyor's office.

A SHERIFF BLUE STEELE NOVELET

When Curly Conliss arrived in Painted Post, nobody there knew of his reputation except Sheriff Blue Steele.

It was an evening in the early fall, about two months before the Indian County election, when Curly Conliss appeared in the Painted Post Saloon.

Most of the regulars were there, including Judge John Bertram, biggest cattleman of the Border country, two of his T Bar T punchers, "Magpie" Stevens the stage driver, "Dictionary" Smith, town handyman, Deputy Sheriff "Shorty" Watts and, of course, Thimble Jack, the bartender.

In the crowd, yet never a part of it, was the sheriff of Painted Post. Blue Steele was a

SHERIFF BLUE STEELE

bronzed, gray-eyed six-footer in a worn calfskin vest with a pair of twin Colts holstered to his buscadero belt. As one of the Frontier's most famous lawmen, legends of his exploits were told throughout the West. Like most genuine heroes, he was modest and slow-spoken.

Steele stood at the far end of the bar, half-concealed in the shadows cast by the bleary hanging coal oil lamp. Curly Conliss, blinking his pale and lashless eyes, did not see the sheriff as he entered. He greeted Judge Bertram with an oily smile and an upraised hand on which a gaudy ring flashed.

Bertram nodded. Conliss worked his way to Bertram's side. Bertram, ruddy-jowled and white-haired, looked at him blankly. He did not remember meeting this smartly-dressed man.

"We rubbed elbows at the Stockmen's Bar at Tucson last spring, Judge," Conliss reminded him in a low, rapid voice. "I reckon a important man like you has forgot."

Bertram thawed a little at the flattery. His faulty memory might be to blame.

"Didn't place you right off," he rumbled amiably. "Howdy."

"My name's Conliss—remember?" Conliss lifted his black Stetson from his shiny, round dome, his eyes twinkling. "Curly Conliss to my friends." His glance went to the little man with thick glasses and short goatee at Bertram's side.

BERTRAM introduced them and they shook hands.

"What brings you to these far parts?" asked Doc Crabtree.

Curly Conliss spun a goldpiece onto the bar and beckoned to the sad-eyed bartender. Thimble Jack set out a whiskey bottle and three glasses.

"I'm here to invest," explained Conliss, pouring himself a stiff one.

They lifted their drinks. Conliss tossed his down and slid the glass back on the bar with a flourish.

"Yes, Doctor, I have plenty of capital," he smiled, backing away and dabbing his over-red lips with the back of his ringed hand. His coat fell open, revealing a short-barreled six-shooter snuggled to a fancy carved gun-belt.

Doc Crabtree peeled off his specs and wiped them.

"Land?"

The other took a forward step, close to Doc Crabtree and Judge Bertram.

"Just now I lugged my bag upstairs," he said in the hushed tone of one imparting a closely-guarded secret. "Let me ask, gentlemen, who runs that barnlike hotel?"

"It runs itself," Judge Bertram notified him.

"I figgered as much," nodded Curly Conliss, lurching away from them again. "You know, I've a notion this town could do with a good hotel."

The man's cuttlefish habit of moving in and backing off again vaguely annoyed Doc Crabtree. He popped his specs back on his nose.

"Magpie and Dictionary find it good enough," he grunted. "There isn't much transient business."

"By Godfrey, Mr. Conliss is right!" boomed Judge Bertram. "That owlhole upstairs is a disgrace to Painted Post! Right now, it's mostly a storehouse for the Doc's relics."

"Who is the owner?" asked Conliss.

Bertram grinned broadly. Doc Crabtree sniffed.

"This building is mine," he announced stiffly.

Curly Conliss slapped him familiarly on the shoulder. A little later the two of them clambered up the narrow, creaky stairs to talk over a deal in Doc Crabtree's office. Judge Bertram watched them go, then rubbed his jaw thoughtfully and moved over beside Blue Steele.

"Listen, Sheriff," he said abruptly, "Do you recollect when I was in Tucson last?"

The hint of a knowing smile touched Steele's lips.

"A year ago, come November, Judge," he drawled.

"Then—then I wasn't there last spring?"

"No, Judge."

"Thunderation!" blurted Bertram, looking confused,

Sheriff Steele encountered Curly Conliss next morning, in the doorway of Chow Now's eatery, across the street. The sheriff was rolling an after-breakfast smoke when the stranger approached the Chinaman's place.

It seemed an accident that Steele's long, gangly legs shifted and blocked the doorway just as Conliss was about to enter. Conliss halted to avoid stumbling over them. A shadow of annoyance crossed his face, although he murmured "Good morning, Sheriff," pleasantly enough.

Steele did not look up from his brown paper quirly.

"So you're a hotel man now, Conliss," he remarked, casually.

Curly hooked thumbs in his fancy gun-belt and backed off a step.

"I've leased the upstairs above the saloon, yes."

"Aim t[illegible]ncrease the accommodations?"

"It can be partitioned into more rooms than [illegible]sent."

"How many?"

Curly Conliss blinked rapidly.

"Oh, a dozen rooms or more."

Steele raised an eyebrow as he licked his cigarette shut.

"Good-sized layout for a little Border cowtown like this. Will the trade justify it?"

"I don't figger on it staying empty," Conliss said.

"Imagine!" breathed Steele. "And we're sixty miles off of the railroad. Sort of risky, wouldn't you say?"

"I came here to invest," Conliss insisted.

"Shore. I heard yuh say that."

STEELE, lighting his cigarette, drew his feet aside. Curly Conliss entered Chow Now's. Doc Crabtree crossed the street with short, rapid steps and stamped dust from his feet in front of the eating place.

"Make a good deal, Doc?" Steele asked offhandedly.

The doc peered inside and saw Conliss seated at the counter. He drew Steele aside.

"What an easy mark," he said in a chuckling whisper. "Fifty a month, cash, that's what he agreed to pay for the Painted Post Hotel."

The doc flashed a small wad to show that he had collected for the first month. Highly pleased with himself, he went into Chow Now's and Steele ambled across to the thick-walled adobe jail office.

He eased himself into his creaky desk chair, leaned back and blew a thoughtful smoke ring at the ceiling.

So Curly Conliss was sinking money into a proposition where he had every chance of losing it. It didn't make sense. Or did it? Curly Conliss didn't have the reputation of an easy mark, despite what Doc Crabtree thought. There was something behind his sudden ambition to enter the hotel business in Painted Post, where travelers seldom came.

Steele was wrapped in deep meditation as his talky little red-headed deputy trotted up the boardwalk and burst inside.

"Good gravy, a wave of prosperity shore has hit this town!" Shorty Watts chirped. "Yuh hear about it, Sheriff?"

DEPUTY SHORTY WATTS

"About Doc Crabtree's deal?"

"More'n that, Sheriff! Dictionary Smith gets thirty a month on the side just to keep the place in shape. And Magpie, he cleans up haulin' furnishin's and lumber and such down from Cottonwood."

"That's fine," Steele acknowledged absentmindedly.

"This town's wakin' up!"

"I wonder."

"New blood is what we need, huh?"

At this remark Steele's lean face turned somber as he glanced across the street toward Chow Now's, where Crabtree and Curly Conliss were emerging into the bright morning sunlight.

"New blood?" Steele mulled the expression over. Shorty wasn't listening. He was off again, to the feed corral to care for his black-and-white pinto and the sheriff's prized steel-dust gelding.

He was currying them beside the feed-rack

when Steele sauntered up and vaulted over the gate bars. The corral also contained Magpie's spare stage horses and a clean-legged bay with one white forefoot.

The bay was Conliss' horse. Steele eyed it expertly, then stepped close and lifted one hoof after another, examining them with Indianlike deliberation.

All at once he was aware of Conliss, standing at the corral gate, toothpick twitching at a corner of his mouth, squinting against the desert glare.

"What do you want to know?" Conliss asked without his usual ingratiating smile. "Why don't you ask?"

The glib little deputy had a quick comeback.

"Didn't know yore hoss could answer questions," he grinned.

"Saddle up, *segundo*," Steele told Shorty. Then he strode to the gate and faced Conliss across it.

"Long ride from Tucson, Conliss," Steele said. "Hard trip on an animal's feet."

Conliss' snake-belly eyelids fluttered.

"Shore is," he agreed suddenly. "Takes the starch out of a critter."

Steele's cold gaze inspected Conliss, up and down, lingering on his fine and flawless linen.

"Three-four days in saddle generally takes the starch out of a man's shirt, also," he drawled. " 'Specially in the warm season, such as now."

Curly Conliss started to sputter some response, but Shorty had the pinto and the steel-dust gelding under leather and was leading them toward the gate.

STEELE dropped the bars. They mounted and rode north along the stage road that dipped and lifted for five dusty miles before it reached the Caliente ford.

At the river, they paused to let the horses drink.

During the ride, Shorty Watts had manfully suppressed his curiosity. But it got the best of him now.

"Yuh mind tellin' a man where he's goin' and why?" he inquired tartly.

The sheriff looked at him in mild surprise.

"Didn't realize you was interested, *segundo*," he replied with a glint of quiet humor.

He told no more. Instead, when the horses lifted their dripping muzzles, he turned east along a dim and little-used trail. It connected Painted Post with the town of Los Pasos, some fifteen miles downstream. There was little communion between the two towns. Visitors from Los Pasos generally spelled trouble, because it was a rascal-ridden hangout for the Border's bad element.

Steele studied the trail-sign as he jogged along. They did not go far before he halted and reached to a pocket of his calfskin vest for the makings.

"Find what we're lookin' for?" Shorty asked.

Steele's mouth corners tightened.

"Our new blood didn't come from Tucson, *segundo*. Not direct anyhow, as he let on."

"From Los Pasos, huh, Sheriff?"

Steele nodded as he moistened his cigarette, rolled and lighted it. As they started back toward town, he had a foreboding of gathering trouble!

CHAPTER II

Ghost Guests

THEN, in surprisingly short time, the Painted Post Hotel was transformed. Outwardly, the building seemed almost unchanged, with its battered corrugated metal roof and weathered board sides. Windows had been added and an outer stairs erected in back, that was all.

But inside two men named Bill McGown and Pete Orr, brought in by Conliss as carpenters, had been busy. The stairs that led up from the saloon were widened and fitted with a handrail, leading to a hallway that separated two rows of small rooms that were furnished in a style that made them seem luxurious in this out-of-the-way part of the Territory. There were sleeping accommodations for a score of guests.

Dictionary Smith, who in former years had been a barn-dauber or sign painter for a patent medicine concern, painted and primped the premises. On the night that the hostelry remodeling was finished, a timid step approached the jail office doorway.

Dictionary entered, worry on his pinched, small face. Steele was at his desk, poring over the yellowed pages of a dull and dusty book entitled "Territorial Election Laws." He laid the book down and eyed the troubled little handyman keenly.

"So Conliss kicked you out, is that it?" he said.

Dictionary cocked his head to one side, like a puzzled sparrow.

"How yuh manage to guess things before bein' told has me beat," he declared. "Anyhow, yuh called the turn, Sheriff. Had my eye on one of those scrumptious new cots, but Mr. Conliss makes me lug my blankets down into Jack's backroom, where I used to hole up."

"That's a mighty hoggish way to act, with all them empty new rooms," Shorty blurted indignantly.

"Did yuh say empty?" cried Dictionary. "Say, listen—"

Whatever he was going to say was interrupted by rapid footsteps on the boardwalk. Doc Crabtree came in.

"That man Conliss tossed me out of my own

building!" he cried. "All on account of I didn't have a written agreement to keep my office upstairs!"

Steele rose and touched a match to the wall lamp above his desk.

"The man yuh called a sucker, eh?" he breathed.

"Looks like I was the sucker!" Doc Crabtree complained. "Seems I've got to move into the saloon backroom."

"That means I go out and live in the sagebrush with the jackrabbits," objected Dictionary. "I won't sleep where you hang your skeleton and other spooky souvenirs, Doc!"

"Mr. Conliss claims he's got the new hotel all rented up," Dictionary Smith told Steele.

"Rented?" yipped Shorty. "Who to?"

"Ghosts! There's clothes hangin' in every one of them new rooms?"

"Did you say clothes?" asked Steele.

Dictionary bobbed his head.

"That's what. Clothes, apparel, includin' hats hangin' on hooks!"

Steele's brow puckered as he thumbed the pages of the book on his desk.

"Doc," he said, "when the judge hits town, send him over."

"John ain't due tonight. What you want of him?"

Steele seldom answered pointblank, prying questions with such directness.

"Legal advice, mainly. Better go tend to yore movin' now."

"And let us think," Shorty added importantly.

"You vamoose, too, *segundo*," Steele said.

Grumbling, Shorty slapped his big hat on his red head and stalked out with the others. Steele heard them jabbering their way back to Thimble Jack's place. He creaked back in his chair, with knitted brows.

He was in that thoughtful pose, later, when a confident step paused at the jail office doorway. Steele did not look up.

"Come in, Conliss," he said. "Been expectin' you."

CURLY CONLISS came in and jauntily sat down on a corner of Steele's flat-topped desk. His eyes flicked to the book that lay face down.

"I hear you need legal advice, Sheriff," he said with a leer.

"You a lawyer?"

"I know enough law to keep you out of trouble, Sheriff. Better follow my advice."

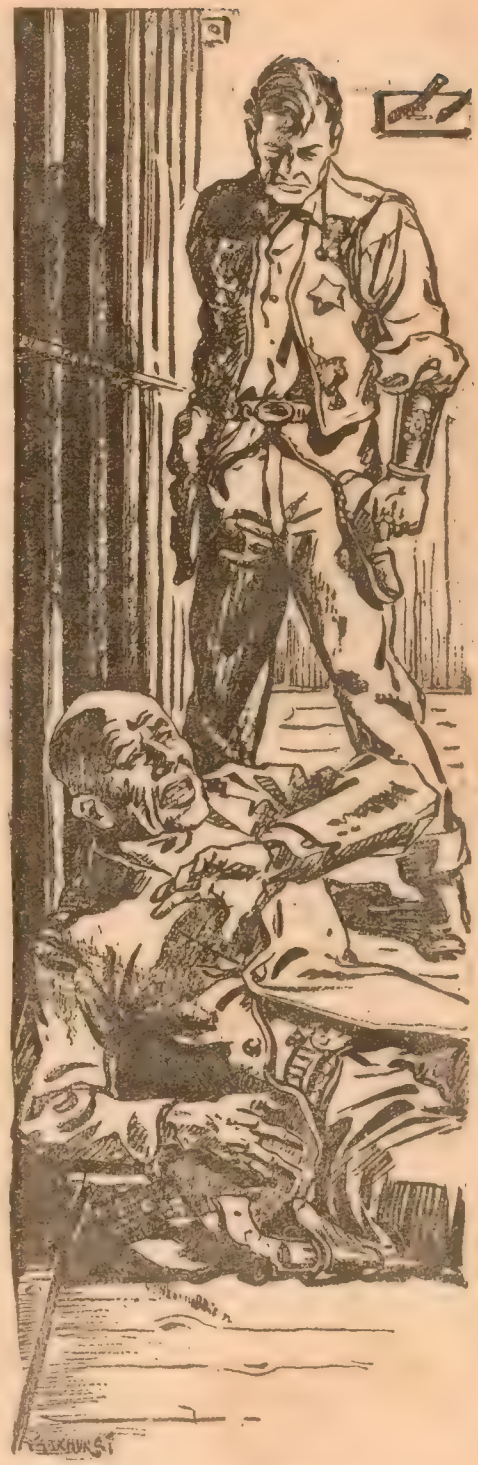
"Fine. Let's have it."

Curly slid to his feet. He backed away with that familiar cuttlefish gesture, hooking the ringed hand in his fancy gun-belt. The yellow jewel on his finger flashed.

"Keep yore long nose out of my affairs," he said boldly. "That's my advice."

"You said you came to invest."

"The word 'invest' has another meaning be-



The bald-headed man collapsed to the floor

sides sinking money in a ramshackle old hotel," said Conliss. "Ask Dictionary Smith what it means."

Steele leaned forward and laid his elbows on the desk.

"No need to," he said softly. "Invest also means to beseige, surround and capture."

The other checked himself in his forward stride.

"I—I hardly expected—"

"A cowtown sheriff to know the ins and outs of the English language? Well, Conliss, I savvy the ins and outs of crooked politics, also."

"What you driving at?"

"Your scheme is to capture Painted Post. That is, to capture the vote at the coming election. By trickery."

The ringed hand was close to the gun snuggled to the fancy gun-belt. Conliss was breathing a little faster.

"Your hotel scheme was a smart one, Conliss," Steele went on in a level voice. "You didn't want to bring yore Los Pasos rascals here before election day. You're tryin' to establish so-called legal residence for them all under the old law that wherever a man hangs his hat and keeps his personal effects, that's his lawful domicile. You figger to pack yore hotel with more imported voters than there are honest, bona fide voters in Indian County."

It was a long speech for the sheriff. And it was a telling one. Conliss blinked and wet his lips.

"What are you going to do about it?" he sneered. "Nothing! Neither you nor that old fool Bertram."

Conliss strode forward as he flung the scornful challenge. But he came up short, because Steele was on his feet now, forcing him back.

"You're wrong there, Conliss. There's something I can do about it. We're takin' a little ride, you and me together."

The other fell back, lifting his hat to run a hand over his shiny, moist forehead.

"You can't shoot your way through this, blast your hide!" he uttered hoarsely. "How many men have you killed since you've been in office, anyhow?"

"The tally's not finished," Steele retorted. "But we haven't reached the gunning stage, Conliss. You and me, we're going to Los Pasos! Where you've set yourself up as the next Sheriff of Painted Post!"

He laid a firm grip on his surprised rival's right arm.

"Ready?" he rasped.

"I've been ready for this," was the strange response, "for a long time."

Steele felt Conliss' arm muscles go tense as Conliss swung his fist. The ring gem, in its jagged setting, missed Steele's face by a fraction of an inch.

The fight in the jail office did not last long. Limber and quick-footed, Steele eluded Curly Conliss' first savage rushes. The surprise of the rash attack had passed. What astonished Steele was that Conliss ventured to fight at all. Fair and open methods were not his style.

QUICKLY Steele's opening came. He took full advantage of it. His fists cracked loudly as they knocked Conliss back against the cell. Colliding with the bars, the bald-headed man collapsed to the floor, one arm flung across his welted face. His other hand snaked for the six-shooter under his coat. Steele snapped out one word.

"Don't!"

Like a dash of ice water, the warning brought Conliss to his senses.

Wadding a handkerchief to his bleeding mouth, Conliss rose groggily to his feet. Steele seized him by the arm again.

"Ready?" he repeated. His face was set like hard rock.

"All right," Conliss agreed in a muffled voice. "We'll leave it to the boys."

After all, this was as good a way as any. Over at Los Pasos, among his own henchmen, were many fast triggers. There he would not need to face Steele alone.

"Head for the corral."

There was a young moon high in the sky as they rode on their amazing mission. Amazing it was that rivals for high office should carry their campaign into a bailiwick where the authority of that office existed not at all.

Aside from the overwhelming danger that awaited at Los Pasos, every minute of the ride invited treachery. Conliss' coat flapped open in the night breeze. If Steele was unwary, Conliss might whip out the six-shooter and fire.

But Steele remained watchful. When they rode abreast, he obliged Conliss to ride ahead. At other times he reined in the gelding and always let Conliss proceed in front of him at the narrow places.

In this fashion they reached their destination. The night's revelry was at its height in sordid, sinful Los Pasos.

The Tecolote Saloon was the center of activity. It was a wide-roofed *cantina* with a porched front. From the shuttered windows slats of light weirdly illuminated a hitch-rail crowded with horses.

Squarely into the path of light Steele rode, herding Curly Conliss with him. There he swung from saddle and flipped his macarty rope over the rail.

"We—we're goin' in?" croaked Conliss.

"That's why we came."

"Carrying the fight to the enemy's camp, huh? Mighty dramatic showoff, Sheriff. But remember, whatever happens, it was your own idea, not mine."

"Do your talkin' inside," Steele said curtly.

He laid hold of the other's arm and forced Conliss into the Tecolote.

Almost at once Steele was recognized by the swirling crowd. Memory of him was branded

too deep among Arizona's lawbreakers for them to forget. The noise subsided. Silence engulfed the place.

Giff Toomey, boss of the Tecolote, pushed his way forward. He was a typical master of ceremonies in such a Border honky-tonk, a big man with wavy, swept-back hair, a long cigar and a vast expanse of brocaded vestfront.

"Ain't often yuh honor us, Sheriff Steele," he said smoothly. "Since it's unusual, excuse my bad manners for askin' what brings yuh."

Conliss wished to conceal he had been brought here against his will. He flung up his jeweled hand.

"I can tell you why he came!" he blustered loudly.

"We'd rather the sheriff spoke for hisself," Toomey interrupted suavely. If he had any knowledge of Conliss' plot, he didn't show it.

STEELE looked about him. Most of the faces were hostile, but mixed with the hostility was curiosity.

"What I've got to say, Giff," he began, "is for the misguided hombres that expect this man Conliss to be next Sheriff of Painted Post."

"Political talk, huh?" said Toomey. "Well, yuh both can have yore say. The Tecolote Debatin' Society welcomes yuh. Just climb up there on the forum."

He indicated the bar and motioned the crowd to make way.

A hum of talk started as the two swung onto the bar. Here was unexpected entertainment. The crowd closed in expectantly.

Conliss was overwhelmed with the realization that he was at an uncomfortable disadvantage as he gazed through swirls of smoke on the sea of upturned faces. A quick look in the back mirror told him this. His lips were puffed and a swollen welt extended to one discolored eye. He was not an impressive candidate for sheriff.

Steele's badge caught the light from the Tecolote's glittering chandeliers. He was unruffled and calm. He had never campaigned for his job before. He never knowingly had made a speech in his life. Action generally accompanied any words he had to say.

"Conliss," he ordered in a voice heard throughout the place, "tell 'em that yore game is finished."

A full-bearded man in the crowd intervened.

"Hold on, Steele," he shouted. "This is a free country, ain't it? If Curly wants to run for sheriff, who says he can't?"

"On fake votes, the law says he can't."

"The sheriff has his own notions about the law," spoke up Conliss. "He claims that you, Bigler, and the rest of the boys aren't citizens of Indian County."

"We will be by the time election day rolls around," shouted Bigler. "It'll be ballots, then, not bullets!"

A chorus of agreement greeted that sally. Steele's keen gaze darted from face to face. He knew now who Conliss' backers were. He marked them well. Some of them he knew to be trouble-makers.

"Not a man of you has been in Painted Post for two years or more," Steele challenged boldly. "And you didn't linger long enough to establish residence then. I saw to that."

"You can't prove the boys haven't been there," Conliss contradicted. "They've signed the hotel register and they've rented rooms."

Hoofbeats sounded in the street. Boots thumped on the Tecolote porch. The doors swung open. Into the jammed Tecolote barged Judge Bertram, red-faced and puffing. And Shorty Watts with him.

They breathed a sigh of relief when they saw Steele was safe. The judge headed for the bar, one hand upraised.

"Call it off, Sheriff," he boomed. "Conliss ain't busted no law yet. Bad intentions ain't a crime under the law. Our only bet is to wait till election day and challenge his fly-by-night votes."

Bigler and the others whooped. Only Conliss mopped his shiny head and swaggered along the bar and called to the crowd to drink on him.

Giff Toomey elbowed his way to Steele.

"Well, Sheriff, yuh've had yore say. I gave yuh a fair break. What now?"

Shorty struggled alongside the bar.

"Right now," he panted, "let's hightail it out of here, Sheriff."

There was nothing else to do. Bigler and the others jeered and hooted as the trio from Painted Post withdrew and hit the trail.

CHAPTER III

For Border Rule

NOTHING was said until they were well outside of Los Pasos. The silence grew too oppressive for comfort. Finally Judge Bertram cleared his throat noisily.

"Thunderation, don't I earn any thanks for rushin' over here to the rescue?" he blurted.

"Shore—the thanks of Conliss," Steele answered in a brittle voice. The derisive cries of Conliss' friends still rang in his ears. It was the nearest to defeat he had known in his long career of fighting Border outlawry.

"Anyhow, I gave you sound legal advice," maintained Bertram. "And remember this. That man ain't no ordinary renegade. He's slippery, a regular cactus phantom! We got to play inside the law with him. A old-fashioned gun-whipping won't do."

It occurred to Shorty Watts that Sheriff Steele might be wondering how he and the judge had turned up at Los Pasos.

"The judge come into town after all," he explained. "When we found you was gone, and Conliss, too, then the judge recollected seein' two riders slantin' south from the Caliente ford, on his way in from the T Bar T."

"Bein' just half-moonlight, I couldn't see who it was," Bertram added. "But after I got to town I figgered out it must have been you and that hyena Conliss."

"Yuh shore took a long chance, Sheriff, paradin' into that den of varmints without me," Shorty scolded. "Did I miss anything?"

It was obvious from his answer that Steele wasn't listening intently to his companions.

"The law is a mighty fickle thing," he mused. "It was made to protect honest men. Yet some crooks can twist it around for their own benefit."

"Wiser men than you have made that observation, son," agreed the judge. "It's a cinch that law and justice don't always herd together. But the danger don't end there. When that happens, there's usually some well-meanin' man like yourself that tries to right things by grabbin' off a little more authority than the people gave him."

"What's wrong about that?" demanded Shorty.

"Plenty!" boomed the judge. "Then is when this thing called democracy starts to fall apart. It turns into a dictatorship."

It was a strange sort of lecture, coming from Bertram, who was by nature an impulsive man.

"You see, son, it's thisaway," he continued. "Bad hombres have been lookin' for your weak point for a long time. They never found it. But Conliss aims to. He knows that in times past you've ruled this Border country rough-shod. His idea is to get you riled and go off half-cocked. That's why you've got to play this game accordin' to Hoyle. You get what I'm drivin' at now?"

The older man was right. Steele knew it. Conliss had to be licked legally. He couldn't be bluffed and rawhided as Steele had handled less important men.

"All right, Judge," he agreed after a thoughtful pause. "I'll do it yore way, the hard way."

Silence fell over them again, a silence broken only by hoofs on the hard trail and the dry creak of saddle leather and the hushed sounds of the desert night. That silence wrapped the unvoiced thoughts of the three of them until they reached the ford, where Bertram said good-night and reined up-river to his spread.

Steele was at his desk in the jail office next morning when Curly Conliss came back to Painted Post. He saw the sheriff through the open window and pulled up at the hitch-rack. His face was still bruised but he oozed with self-confidence.

"There's a matter I forgot to mention last night, Steele," he greeted smoothly. "I'm bringing it to your official attention now."

The sheriff flipped a cigarette butt out into the dust.

"Shoot," he invited.

"Doc Crabtree refuses to vacate."

"Can't say as I blame him."

"That's not the point. The law says I can dispossess him."

"How?"

"By calling on you as sheriff to make out a legal notice to vacate and serve it on him."

STEELE'S bronzed face flushed darkly and Conliss noted that with satisfaction.

"Petty legal squabbles," Steele finally managed to say, "ain't our style here at Painted Post."

Conliss chuckled soundlessly. He was enjoying this.

"It's your official duty, remember, to protect the rights of a law-abiding citizen and community builder," he warned.

"Meanin' yourself?"

"You've got the idea. Now get busy."

Slowly Steele rose, moved around the desk and out onto the sidewalk. Conliss was within his rights. Steele mastered a powerful impulse to take justice and Conliss into his own hands. But he remembered Bertram's advice. This was to be a war of wits.

"I'll set my old friend Doc Crabtree and his museum out in the street if you plumb insist, Conliss," he said grimly. "But first, let me remind you of a few things. Doc Crabtree is mighty popular in Indian County. He never turns down a call for help. He's saved the lives of a heap of folks and tended others when they didn't have a dime. He's never sent out a bill and he's about the best citizen we've got. This country won't take kindly to him being tossed out of the place that he hoped some day to turn into a hospital."

"This country will soon forget old Crabtree," Conliss sneered. "And Crabtree won't be the only one who lands in the street, Steele. Now fix those papers. I'll be waiting down at Thimble Jack's place."

With an insulting grin, Curly Conliss touched rein to his white-footed bay and jogged on to the saloon.

Gripped by helplessness, Steele watched his man go. Never had any desperado dared flaunt him like this. Did it mean that his grip on the Borderland was slipping?

He found one consolation in the thought that his humiliation was unobserved. But even this small comfort was torn from him. Leaning against the weathered adobe wall of the jail was Magpie Stevens, his bristly, hollow cheeks working rapidly on a wad of finecut, as though he was devouring an especially choice morsel of gossip.

"He's out to run this town and hain't keepin'

it a secret, Sheriff," the old stage driver observed brightly.

"Nothing's a secret when you're around," Steele replied tartly. Magpie's loose tongue was his well-known failing. Of all persons, Magpie was the last one Steele would have chosen to witness the recent scene.

Magpie poked both hands in his pants pockets and spat.

"Well now, Sheriff," he said with a knowing wink, "a nose for news can work both ways, did yuh ever think of that?"

"What're yuh driving at?"

"I got a long tongue, mebbe, like folks say. But I also got long ears. Not meanin' that I pried into this confab on purpose. I'm sleepin' yonder at the feed corral lately and it just happened that yore palaver with Mr. Conliss woke me up, in time to hear Mr. Conliss refer to hisself as a law-abiding citizen. That catched my attention in pertickler, Sheriff. Because just two-three days ago I took them jaspers that worked for him up to Cottonwood."

"McGown and Orr?"

"Yup, that's them. They had a bottle and got oiled up and told me they'd knowed Curly Conliss in the old days, down in West Texas. And they let on as how that Mr. Conliss wasn't exackly a law-abidin' citizen there."

Magpie paused to let his news sink in. And to build for a climax.

"Go on!" snapped Steele. "What's the rest?"

"Well, Sheriff, it seems like there's an old murder charge hangin' fire over Mr. Conliss' shiny bald head down in Texas."

AT LAMPLIGHT time, Shorty Watts burst into Thimble Jack's place, his homely, freckled face puckered with worry. He flung a glance along the bar, then to the card table in the corner where Doc Crabtree sat at his usual evening game of solitaire.

"Anybody seen the sheriff around?" asked the little deputy.

Doc Crabtree glanced up from his cards.

"Who wants him?" he asked.

Curly Conliss was at the bar. He turned irritably.

"So Steele cut for it when his job got too hot for him!" he rasped.

Shorty bristled. Eyes blazing and fists clenched, he approached Conliss.

"Drop that talk or I'll knock yuh for a corner pocket, yuh greasy human cue ball!" he threatened.

Conliss backed away before the smaller man's sudden ferocity.

"Steele violated his oath of office and I'll get his hide," he blustered.

Shorty crowded after him, fists cocked. The onlookers braced themselves as though for an explosion of dynamite. But before Watts could move came Magpie's voice cut in from the far end of the bar, like a blade chopping off a sizzling fuse.

"Yup, I seen the sheriff."

"Where?" Shorty and Conliss threw the query at him in unison.

Magpie dug out a package of finecut and mouthed a wad of it.

"On his hoss. Headin' out of here. Didn't ask where."

"You know more than you're telling," rasped Conliss.

"Perhaps," was the unperturbed answer. "But I hain't tellin' more'n I know."

"Mebbe he surged over to Los Pasos again without me knowin'," Shorty Watts sputtered.

"He hasn't!" Conliss cut in, maneuvering past the little deputy to his position at the bar. "He knew when he's licked, so he draggle-tailed out of here."

Shorty's left fist cut him short. It whizzed in a wide, healthy swing and Conliss' feet left the floor. Almost before he hit, Doc Crabtree grinned and beckoned to Dictionary.

"Trot upstairs and get my black satchel," he ordered.

Dictionary skittered around the fallen man in a cautious, wide circle.

"Hey, you, Thimble Jack," went on Crabtree. "A bucket of cold water."

The bartender set the pail in which he rinsed glasses on the bar. Shorty grabbed it and dumped the contents on Conliss' gasping,

[*Turn page*]

TEST SIGHT
TASTE RIGHT
If the ladder is placed against building, how far up will it reach?
ANSWER.
It will reach exactly to the top of the building.
PEPSI-COLA
12 OZ. BOTTLE
5¢

upturned face. The supine man spluttered, choked and sat up weakly. He saw Shorty and his head stopped swaying. He coughed a curse and reached for his six-shooter.

It was a futile move. The redheaded deputy was no amateur in this game of rough-and-tumble. He clapped the empty bucket over Conliss' dribbling, bald head and forced it down. Then he kicked the six-shooter out of Conliss' hand.

Dictionary came tearing downstairs with the Doc's black satchel and set it on the card table. Crabtree opened it with mock gravity and peered inside.

"First tool I'll be needin' is a can opener," he announced cheerfully. "Unless two or three husky gents can pry off that bucket."

Helping hands got Conliss erect beside the bar. Muffled howls came from inside the bucket as Thimble Jack grabbed the edges, braced his feet and jerked mightily. On the fourth jerk the bucket came loose.

"Shucks!" lamented Doc Crabtree a few moments later. "It's nothing worse'n a dislocated jaw and two-three wobbly teeth! You got to exercise more, deputy. You shore are gettin' soft."

Conliss wasn't saying anything. He couldn't with the way Doc Crabtree had cinched the bandages. Dictionary and Magpie helped him upstairs and to bed.

When they came down, Shorty was waiting for the old stage driver.

"Nothin' to stop us talkin' freely now," he said. "Where's the sheriff?"

Magpie didn't know. But he enjoyed the importance of having others think that he did.

"Don't worry about him," he said in a mysterious half-whisper. "He left sudden and chances are he'll come back the same way. Let's all have a drink."

At that hour, Steele's sweat-streaked gelding was loping down the last long slope that led into the railroad town of Cottonwood. A westbound train, its lights making a long serpentine in the early dark, was just pulling into the station.

Steele spoke in a low voice to his horse. It lifted its gait to a run. The first few shanties on the outskirts of town whizzed past horse and rider as the stage road widened into a rutted street.

Riding low, Steele urged the gallant animal to its last notch of speed. They were in the town now, betwen tall-fronted buildings, past lighted store fronts where idlers paused to turn and stare as they raced past.

On the last stretch, with hardly a rifle-shot distance between him and the station platform, Steele saw the locomotive puff black smoke against the darkening sky. The train began to move. The lighted coaches crawled past the station, past the freight shed and the water tower, gathering speed.

The rails were still singing when Steele projected himself from saddle and breathlessly confronted the surprised station agent. He fired a breathless question.

"Passengers. Two strangers? Shore was, Sheriff. Their destination? Goshlemighty, I don't know. They allowed as how they was travelin' on mileage tickets."

CHAPTER IV

Misfire Murder

CURLEY CONLISS wisely decided that one encounter with that five-feet-two package of blasting powder, known as Shorty Watts, was enough. In the days that followed, he was venomously silent but attempted no revenge. Instead, he grimly bided his time for rapidly-nearing election day.

The disappearance of Blue Steele at first caused no serious concern among his friends. But as days fell from the calendar like the willows along the Caliente sent leaves fluttering in the autumn winds, his unexplained absence produced growing uneasiness.

It was more than uneasiness with Shorty. He and Steele had been constant companions. The little deputy's devotion was absolute. He mooned and mourned like a deserted pup. He started nervously at small sounds in the night. He grew fidgety, hollow-eyed and his bantering good humor turned to gloom.

"It's gettin' serious when the *segundo* can't eat," Doc Crabtree remarked one morning as he straddled a stool at Chow Now's.

"Eat? I just seen him wrap hisself around three flapjacks, bacon and cawfee!" grunted Magpie.

"He used to surround a dozen and holler for more. Have you got any idea where the sheriff went and why? How about dropping Shorty some hint? Else I might have a patient on my hands."

Magpie drooped one eye craftily.

"There's some things too important to tell, but—"

Magpie appeared on the verge of divulging something important. But the arrival of Curley Conliss halted the words on his lips.

Nodding curtly at the seated pair, Conliss found himself a place at the far end of the counter. Magpie got up and ambled towards him sociably.

"Right nice fellers, Mister Conliss. Sort of hated to see 'em go."

Conliss flicked a look at him.

"What fellows?" he asked.

"McGown and Orr. Old friends of yourn, warn't they?"

Conliss blinked and turned as Magpie shrugged his bony shoulders. "On a sixty-mile stage ride, passengers get to talkin'," he said. He paused to grope for finecut.

"Sort of cold sleepin' out nights." Magpie grinned at Conliss. "Been thinkin' about movin' back in the hotel, Mister Conliss."

Conliss' liver-colored lips parted, then closed again. He said nothing. Nor did he raise any objection, during the day, when Magpie piled his possessions back into one of the choice rooms. But later that night, a gunshot jarred the premises.

Almost instantly Doc Crabtree was out in the hall in shin-length nightshirt, brandishing a long-barreled shooting-iron. He was just in time to blaze away at a shadowy figure scuttling down the hall. He fired two more shots from the new outer flight of back stairs but he knew he had missed because the fugitive never faltered. Darkness hid the fleeing form.

Crabtree hopped back into the hall and found the door to Magpie's room open. Thimble Jack and Dictionary had joined him, babbling sleep-befuddled questions.

"Light a lamp, you nitwits!" cried the Doc.

Under the blankets on Magpie's cot, where the moon threw beams of silvery light from [illegible] new windows, they found a heap of old clothes. It had been rolled into convincing size and shape of a slumbering human form. There was a bullet hole squarely where the heart would have been.

After that Doc Crabtree kicked open the door to the room that Curly Conliss had occupied. As he expected, he found it vacant. Delaying only long enough to don a pair of pants, he tore up to the jail office and awoke Shorty Watts.

They found Magpie snoring peacefully on a hay shakedown in the harness shed up at the feed corral. "Can't a man sleep out when he craves fresh air?" was all shrewd old Magpie would tell them.

DOC CRABTREE stuck the six-shooter in the waist-band of his pants and scowled.

"All right, Magpie, be mysterious!" snapped Doc Crabtree. "But don't you haul out of here on your up-trip at daylight without a bodyguard!"

"I can tell yuh who that'll be," Shorty added grimly, "much as I hate to travel before breakfast."

"Conliss shore cut for it, plumb hasty," chattered Dictionary. "The whole thing is right mysterious."

"His white-footed bay is gone, too," remarked Doc Crabtree. "Don't strike me as so all-fired mysterious. We might as well go back to bed."

Curly Conliss didn't reappear in Painted Post. It was the eve of election day when Magpie and Shorty returned from Cottonwood. The steel-dust gelding was not to be seen when they passed the feed corral. And as the old stagecoach lurched to a stop in front of the saloon, sounds of early revelry poured out past the batwing doors. A knot of horses stood at the hitchrack and Shorty remembered having seen some of them in front of the Tecolote on that night when he and Judge Bertram had "rescued" Steele at Los Pasos.

"Reckon this proves that the sheriff ain't back!" gloomed the little deputy. "Migosh, if he don't show up by this time tomorrow, Painted Post law is done for."

"And you'll go back to punchin' cows," Magpie said comfortingly, as he swung down to the sidewalk. "But I wouldn't worry about that, not yet."

Magpie Stevens had no reason for his confidence except that Steele had always met every crisis. And a crisis was fast approaching. A feeling of dire portent hung in the air. At that hour, far up the stage road, a southbound rider tilted his lean body to the wind as though to aid his travel-weary horse on the last remaining miles of its gruelling journey.

It was a smoke-colored animal, a steel-dust gelding, but gray now with the dust of many Arizona trails. Its sleek sides were ribby and its flanks gaunt. The man that tilted in saddle was haggard from hardships that would have discouraged a less determined one.

But Steele had found McGown and Orr. From information wrung from them he had burned the wires to west Texas. Inside his calfskin vest the sheriff carried a warrant, arranged by telegraph that would end the bold and ambitious career of Curly Conliss.

The night settled down and a full moon lifted itself over the desert's far rim as Steele neared the Caliente ford, where he had faced so many deadly climaxes.

The gelding paused at the river's edge. It was low-water season and the flow swirled almost soundlessly over the shallows. All at once Steele tensed, then slid from saddle. From somewhere downstream, on the yonder bank, came sounds that were not a part of the wilderness medley.

The sounds came again, a mixture of voices magnified in crossing the moonlit expanse of river. Steele drew the gelding into the shadows of a cutbank and crouched there.

Into view now came three riders, traveling unhurriedly up the Los Pasos trail. The distance was too great and the moon not yet high enough for recognition. But every man has his style in saddle, some movement or trick of posture by which he makes himself known. Curly Conliss was no exception. To confirm his identity could be seen the white foot of the horse which he bestrode.

The trio of riders had almost reached the stage road. Lightning-fast planning busied Steele's brain. To splash headlong towards Conliss and his companions with a shouted

challenge would draw their fire on himself, perhaps with disastrous results. And to let them get out of his sight would be flouting the Fate that had brought them to him.

He was saved from the necessity for decision by the rapid beat of hoofs. Conliss and his men heard them too. They halted. Riders were racing up from the direction of Painted Post. Two men loomed up as they left the shadows, where the road dipped to the ford through fringing willows. "It's Bigler!" sang out Conliss. "Lee Bigler and Todd Jones!"

THE bearded Bigler and Jones reined short near them, amid a billow of dust.

"About time you was showin' up, Curly!" Bigler yelled angrily. "Plenty of trouble has busted loose! That was a fine mess yuh sent us into at Painted Post."

"You mean Steele is back?" Conliss' voice was tight.

"No, it was the measly little *segundo*."

Conliss spat out a curse. "Couldn't the five of you handle that half-sized redhead?"

"Not when he had us lined up at the bar like tenpins. With two other wallopers sidin' him."

"Who?"

"Well, Doc Crabtree popped out of the hotel stairway with an old six-gun, or else we'd of settled it with the *segundo* and Magpie Stevens when they busted in on us. Chuck, Bill and old Hilary are in the calaboose and Chuck has a bullet hole in his shoulder. Me and Jonesy, here, we got away."

Conliss interrupted with a husky croak.

"Magpie Stevens? Did you say *Magpie?*"

"If yuh have any doubts, look at Jonesy's face. That old buzzard laid his cheek open with his black-snake whip."

The appearance of the fleeing pair and the ensuing excitement gave Steele his chance.

Moving upstream a few yards, where the willows screened him from Conliss and his men, he kneed the gelding into the river and crossed as quietly as possible. At low water such a crossing was possible above the ford.

They were not aware of his presence until he was across and almost upon them.

"Freeze, the bunch of you! Conliss, poke 'em up!"

There was a strained interval of silence. Then Conliss' voice came, hoarse and frightened. "Who's talking?" he asked.

"The law! With a Texas warrant. You're under arrest, Conliss!"

"Holy tootin', Steele!" gasped Bigler.

"Ride into the river, Bigler," ordered the sheriff. "You and Jones and that other three. Ride on across. You sit tight, Conliss. Keep those hands up."

Conliss slowly raised his shaking palms.

"Why don't you take him?" he rapped out at his henchmen. "You, Bigler! Yuh talked big at Los Pasos."

Bigler edged away from the others and reined for the ford.

"It's yore party, Curly," he said. "C'mon, Jonesy, if yuh hanker to vote tomorrow."

"There'll be no voting for a murderer," Steele declared. "Your candidate is due for the rope. Wade into the river, you three!"

"Throw down on Steele, you quitters," howled Conliss.

The man at the sheriff's left made a move for his gun.

Bright flame licked out from the willows. The man dropped limply. In the commotion Conliss whirled his horse around and fled. Steele fired twice. Conliss' hat leaped from his head. His bald dome shone as he raced frenziedly down the Los Pasos trail.

Steele followed in swift pursuit. Events crowded one on the other with breathless speed now. Past the willows, on a bench thickly studded with cactus, Steele saw the white-footed bay up ahead, now riderless.

Had that hat shot dumped Conliss? A less seasoned gun fighter might have cherished such a notion. But Steele's caution increased. His eyes searched the moon shadows. To the right in a clump of cactus he saw a pale, roundish patch.

Moonlight on a boulder it might have seemed to another man. But his keen gaze detected a tiny, glinting movement. Too many times had Steele observed that flashing ring on Conliss' gun hand not to know it now.

Without drawing rein he flung himself from saddle and his action was in the nick of time. Conliss' bullet clipped the air over the gelding's saddle.

Steele hit the ground, rolled, came up on his feet. Both of his Colts drummed out, faster than a man could count. The whitish patch that wasn't a boulder dropped to the ground. The moon glint died as the ringed hand went limp.

CURLY CONLISS, betrayed by his own flashy vanity, was dead when Steele reached him. His crafty fall in the cactus proved to be his final sly and scheming feat in the struggle for Border rule.

When the steel-dust gelding returned, hazing the white-footed bay ahead of it, the sheriff was rolling a cigarette. Steele's face was solemn as he cupped a match. Then he mounted and rode away, leading the bay behind him.

A gentle smile wreathed his lips now. For he was thinking of Shorty and how good it would be when the two of them were together again.

Next Issue: SHERIFF BLUE STEELE in THE CIRCLE 7 CRIME

One of the horsethieves dropped his pistol, reeled in the saddle and then recovered

BRONC FIGHTER'S FORTUNE

By CLIFF WALTERS

Chipmunk Marsh is robbed and given a ducking before he can get around to proving he's an all right hombre!

THE new cowboy had been summed up by Hank Layson in one colorful sentence.

"He ain't much bigger'n a chipmunk, but he's about as quick as one—and mighty powerful for his size." This was the report the cowpuncher, Layson, made to the boss of the Rafter A outfit after he had spent that first day breaking broncs with "Chipmunk" Marsh.

"I'd sure like to trade that little bronc fighter out of that bay hoss of his," said big, honest, middle-aged Jim Winfield, owner of one of the two largest ranches in Lark Valley, a choice spot on choice range. "I saw that bay step out this mornin' when you and Chipmunk was roundin' up them broncs in the big pasture.

"And that long-geared bay can sure

travel faster'n a shot-at deer that's been frightened frantic."

"He shore can," Hank Layson agreed. "Which is why I've been thinkin' all day about that Pioneer celebration comin' up in Rangeville next week. That danged Three Bar outfit's been blowin' around about how fast a black horse they have over there." Hank Layson gazed down-valley with slightly hostile eyes, in the direction of the rival outfit.

"That black horse beat everythin' we put up against him last summer," said Jim Winfield. "And took our money—as well as draggin' our pride in the dust of his flyin' hoofs. But now this bay horse of Chipmunk's shore makes me sit up."

Sighting the newest, and smallest, man on the Rafter A outfit—a little man who was heading for the bunkhouse, Hank Layson let out a yell.

"Come over here, Chipmunk," he shouted. "The boss wants to talk to you."

Chipmunk Marsh, a sandy-haired little bronc fighter with bright blue eyes, soon joined them.

"Don't tell me I'm bein' fired already," he said. "And for nearly upsettin' you this afternoon, Mr. Layson, when I ducked between them corral-pole legs of yourn, tryin' to ketch a bronc that was about to get away with my saddle."

With this, the small cowboy, newest member of the outfit, smiled.

"I'll bet you never even knocked your hat off, either, Chipmunk," said Jim Winfield. "But we're talkin' horse racin'." He explained about the mile race that would be held at the Pioneer celebration in Rangeville next week. He also warned Chipmunk Marsh about the speed of the black horse belonging to Chris Benedict, owner of the rival outfit, the Three Bar.

"I've never seen the black horse run," said Marsh, "but I'll risk my whole pile of ten dollars on my bay. I've seen him run."

"Good," said Hank Layson. "And bless Old Lady Fate for keepin' you trimmed down to jockey size. But don't eat as much as you did for supper tonight or— Wait'll I meet some of them hard-blowin' Three Bar riders that've been proddin' me into makin' a horse race bet with them."

Hank Layson did not have long to wait. It was only the next morning that he and Chipmunk Marsh, hunting for five head of broncs that had escaped from the big pasture, encountered a Three Bar rider on the big, sage-covered bench to the south of the valley.

Chipmunk Marsh was riding the crest of one ridge, and Hank Layson another when Marsh, some little distance away, saw his lanky companion stop to talk to another rider. Almost before Marsh knew it, however, Hank Layson and the Three Bar rider, a big fellow wearing batwing chaps, were off their horses and starting to battle.

Chipmunk Marsh rode fast toward the scene and leaped from his horse.

"Stop tanglin', you two," he cried. "Stop actin' like two pups."

The little bronc twister rushed between the two as Hank Layson, his spur catching in a sagebrush, went down.

"Get out of my way," bellowed the husky cowboy, who, back toward Marsh, was eagerly trying to jump upon his luckless opponent. "Get out of my way."

He whirled savagely, tried to shake off the small, wiry man who had grabbed him from behind, and who now clung with such determined tenacity. The big Three Bar rider had drawn back a fist to throw at Chipmunk Marsh, when a look of recognition came over his face.

"Well, I'll be danged! Alex Marsh."

CHIPMUNK MARSH glanced up at the other man's face, an angry red face overhung by shaggy, straw-colored hair. "Well, I'll be danged, too," he grinned. "If it ain't cousin George Possard. How are you, Straw?"

"Don't drag that nickname up into this country," replied the other man. "And I wish you wouldn't be buttin' in just when I had that feller on the run."

"When you had a chance to jump on a man that was down," rumbled Hank Layson, who had disentangled his spur, and had now risen. "All right, Straw. Let's go ahead and finish it."

"Like blazes you will," Chipmunk Marsh declared. "You start the fireworks again, Hank, and I'll drag you on the end of my lariat clean back to the ranch. You start huntin' them hosses we're lookin' for. I'll talk to George a spell and then ketch up with you."

It took some more persuading, but Marsh won out. Heaping hot words on the Three Bar outfit and all its riders, Hank Layson rode away.

The tall man was still wrathful when Chipmunk Marsh overtook him a few minutes later. "I know blamed well that horse hair saddle blanket Possard was ridin' belongs to me," he growled. "It was lost out in the hills when a bronc broke away with my saddle on him. But when I jumped the thievin' coyote, Possard, about it, you stopped me. But I'll get it back some day when none of Possard's friends are taggin' along with me."

Chipmunk Marsh was glad that Hank Layson had not said Possard's cousin. It was evident that Layson, floundering around on the ground, had not heard Marsh acknowledge the relationship.

"I ain't sayin' Possard wouldn't put his hands on something that don't belong to him, Hank," Marsh said, "but, if you still think my bay can outrun that Three Bar black, here's a chance for you to make more'n a saddle blanket." Chipmunk Marsh exhibited a twenty-dollar bill. "Possard is honin' to bet on the black horse in that race next week. I told him you'd take that bet, and that I'd hold stakes."

"You're right I'll take it!" growled Layson. "And I'll take that saddle blanket, too."

It was a week later when Jim Winfield and his several punchers, most of them riding their best rope horses, started driving some wilder mounts, buckers, toward the town of Rangeville.

Jim Winfield lingered to say a few words to Chipmunk Marsh, the only man left at the Rafter A. "That four-mile trip to town'll just limber up your bay, Chipmunk," the boss declared. "But take it easy. All our money has been bet on him."

"I'll be there in plenty of time for the race, and without travelin' too fast," said the little bronc twister, disappointed that he could not ride to town with the others. But he did not dare travel behind a bunch of loose horses on the fleet-footed bay, a high-lifed horse that never wanted other horses to be ahead of him. The bay would prance, fret along and tire himself too much.

"Be sure to water the sorrel stud 'fore you leave," called Winfield over his shoulder. "Wait'll I get some colts from that thousand pounds—that cost me a dollar a pound—and I'll have some fast horses of my own."

"You shore should," agreed Chipmunk Marsh. And that was his sincere conviction. He had never seen a prettier horse than the thousand-dollar stallion which had been shipped into Rangeville three days ago. And bought by Jim Winfield.

CHRIS BENEDICT, the slim, thin-lipped owner of the Three Bar, had wanted that sorrel stallion, too. But he would not bid as much as Winfield had paid for the horse. Well, Chipmunk Marsh had heard that the owner of the Three Bar, in trying to expand his outfit too rapidly, had gotten into financial difficulties. Perhaps he did not have a thousand cash to plank down for even as fine a horse as the sorrel.

Time dragged slowly for Marsh until, at last, he saddled his bay horse, Comet, and headed toward Rangeville. Yet, he was little more than a mile from the deserted ranch when he heard the sharp report of a gun down there in the swale, willowed and somewhat swampy, through which the road ran.

It was while following the willow-crowded road through that swale that the high-spirited bay suddenly snorted and shied.

"Stop," said a gruff voice. Then a squat, hard-eyed man, holding a menacing gun on Chipmunk Marsh, stepped from the willows.

"That looks like a fast horse," he said. "And that's the kind I need."

"Why—Agate?" replied Chipmunk Marsh.

The other man's eyes narrowed intently upon the rider of the bay.

"So it's you, little feller," he said, after a pause. "You're a long ways from the Cedar River country where I last seen you."

"Where a badman named Agate Glaine fished me out of the Cedar River, where I was drowndin' one day," Chipmunk Marsh answered. "Well, I owe you more than a horse, Agate, but I'm needin' this bay mighty bad today. So, if you'd just as soon we won't swap."

"You don't need him as bad as I do," said the badman flatly. "I hate to steal from you, little feller, but it's got to be

that way. The three Lobert brothers are on my trail. They think I lifted some of their loot, which I didn't. Them three coyotes moved up pretty close to me back there in the foothills. Close enough to hit my horse with a bullet. I had to kill him a minute ago. The Loberts was probably near enough to hear that shot. They'll be headin' this way."

Chipmunk Marsh's hand gripped the saddle horn for a moment. Then he said, "You saved my neck once when a locoed bronc stampeded over a river bank with me. If this horse can save yore neck—here, take him!"

Chipmunk Marsh dismounted.

"Thanks."

With that one quick word, Agate Glaine swung up on the bay, hit the trail skirting the edge of the swale, and loped away.

Chipmunk Marsh remained there, hands clenched tightly, and listened to the sound of hoofbeats dying away into distance. He was thinking of the Rafter A cowpunchers who had bet their hard-earned money on a horse race to be run today.

Tormented by that thought, the little bronc twister started trudging slowly back to a deserted ranch. He would procure another horse and ride to Rangeville to tell Jim Winfield and the Rafter A punchers what had happened. But maybe he had better not divulge the identity of the man who had taken the bay race horse. Agate Glaine was a wanted man, a range prowler who, whatever he was, had saved Chipmunk Marsh's life three years ago. And at the risk of his own.

Having started for town wearing his new boots, the tiny cowboy had a pair of hot, uncomfortable feet by the time he had walked that dusty mile back to the ranch. The first place he headed for was the bunkhouse, and his old boots. But he sat there on the edge of his bunk, cooling his feet and thinking about his bay horse, before he changed socks and pulled into his old footgear.

HE WAS just getting up to go out to the corral when, through the bunkhouse window, he sighted a trio of horsemen stringing single file along the willow-lined creek that flowed past the barn and through the corral. Three big, slightly-stooped men who seemed cautious as they drew nearer and nearer to the log barn. Marsh now remembered words spoken to him by Agate Glaine.

"The three Lobert brothers think I got away with some of their loot, which I didn't."

Marsh's body was tense as he came to his feet. He had heard of the three Lobert brothers. They were said to be horse thieves who prowled the Cedar River range. Were these the Loberts? And had they found that the man they hunted had obtained a fresh, fleet horse? Had they given up the chase? Or were they, too, seeking fresh mounts?

Apparently convinced that the Rafter A was entirely deserted of men today—as were all the neighboring ranches in Lark Valley—the trio of riders dismounted at the side of the barn. Then two of them, drawing their guns, moved toward the barn door, opened it and disappeared inside.

A moment later—a moment during which Chipmunk Marsh had quietly moved to the corner of the bunkhouse and picked up Hank Layson's .30-30 which stood there—the two men who had entered the barn appeared again. One of them was leading the thousand-dollar sorrel stallion belonging to Jim Winfield.

Chipmunk Marsh hesitated no longer. Bringing the .30-30 to his shoulder, he pressed the trigger and sent a bullet whizzing through the open door of the bunkhouse. This bullet was quickly followed by others from the same gun. The slugs whistled close to the three men who were caught by surprise. They made a run for their saddles.

Once mounted, two of the men tried to make a fight of it with their six-shooters, while the third was making off with the stallion. But Marsh with his rifle soon settled that. His next slug went tearing through one of the horse-thieves' arms. The outlaw dropped the pistol, reeled in the saddle and then recovered.

This settled the fight. Abandoning the stallion, the three raiders fled.

Chipmunk Marsh might have winged another if the sorrel stallion, frightened by the gunfire and rearing around, had not moved into the line of fire. Dragging his halter rope, the horse then

headed for the big pasture where some other horses grazed.

"They were the three Loberts, shore as shootin'," said Marsh to himself. "But how did they know they'd find a thousand-dollar horse in the Rafter A barn? This ain't their range."

Hastily reloading the .30-30 as he speculated, the bronc twister ran to the ranchhouse. If those three Loberts returned, after their first panic, after they'd realized that only one gun was shooting at them, they might riddle the old bunkhouse with bullets. In which case, Chipmunk Marsh wanted to be in a position to spring another surprise on them.

Minutes ticked by, but the trio did not return. Then the small cowboy's alert eyes caught sight of the trio, far away now, riding over the horizon of Lark Valley, traveling as fast as their jaded horses could go.

"If that sorrel stud wants exercise, I'll ride him to town and tell Jim Winfield what's been goin' on out here," Marsh told himself, as he watched the stallion galloping along the pasture fence, trying to get in with the other horses. "But I'll have to ketch him first."

It was quite a while before Chipmunk Marsh, mounted on a stove-up old roan that had once been Jim Winfield's top cowpony, could drive the sorrel stallion back in the barn. It was considerably later before Marsh, mounted on that sweating, fretful horse, rode into the little town of Rangeville. And up to the livery barn in front of which Jim Winfield and his punchers stood waiting.

DISAPPROVING eyes focused hard on Chipmunk Marsh as he rode up to the barn.

"Well, I guess the contest part of the celebration's all over," he told them.

"Get off that sorrel stud!" Jim Winfield strode forward angrily. "You shore have a heap of gall, Marsh, helpin' yourself to that horse."

"Now, hold on," said the tiny cowboy, obeying the boss' order. "You don't savvy what happened, Jim."

"He savvies you doublecrossed us, you low-crawlin' little snake," rasped lanky Hank Layson. "Where's your bay race horse? Why didn't you ride him to town in time to be of some use?"

From across the street a slim, thin-lipped man emitted a loud hoot.

"That bay race horse you and yore punchers have been blowin' about seems to have changed color, Winfield," he called out.

"Shut up, Benedict, you locoed chump." Winfield turned again to his bronc twister. "Why didn't you ride yore bay to town? At least, you should have give us a little show for the money we bet—and lost—even if you didn't aim to win the race."

"I don't own that bay no longer," said Chipmunk Marsh, troubled by the hostility he had run into. "When I was ridin' to town, a badman pulled a gun on me and made me turn my horse over to him."

"You don't say?" growled Hank Layson, with mock surprise. "Which one of Chris Benedict's riders was this badman? Who was he?"

"I can't say," Chipmunk Marsh answered miserably. He would not divulge the fact Agate Glaine was on this range.

"He looks kind of hot and worried," put in plump Sam Lockridge, another of the Rafter A punchers who had bet liberally on a horse race that had not taken place. "Well, boys, the crick's right behind the barn here. Let's cool Chipmunk Marsh off. And if his dear cousin George Possard, standin' over there across the street, don't like it, we'll talk with him later."

"Let cousin Possard do something about it, eh?" cut in Hank Layson, and made a dive for Chipmunk Marsh.

Other rough hands helped seize the little bronc twister. Angry hands that bore him toward the creek, and hurled him, with a noisy splash, into the swift water.

Gasping, but more angry than frightened, the small cowboy came to a standing position, then struggled his way back to the same bank from which he had been thrown.

"You want some more, eh?" Lockridge demanded.

"Don't do it again, Sam," called Jim Winfield. "Just hand him this money, a week's wages, and tell him not to show up at the Rafter A no more."

"You payin' him wages, after him sellin' us out to his dear cousin? And him

gettin' a cut on all the money they took away from us? Aw, shucks."

"You gang of cheapskate losers," Chipmunk Marsh retorted. "I'll pay you back every nickel you lost, if I have to work steady from now till Doomsday." He grabbed the proffered wages out of Sam Lockridge's hand and threw the money at Winfield. "I never framed up no deal with my no-good cousin, Possard, that's standin' over there with Benedict, grinnin' like an ape."

"The dickens you didn't," Hank Layson retorted. "That's why you butted in and saved him from a beatin' the day him and me was battlin' out near Indian Head."

"Saved you from a beatin', you mean, you squawkin' buzzard," answered the cowboy. "If he'd ever jumped on top of you when you was down, which you was, like an awkward, half-growed coyote pup, he'd beat the daylights out of you. And now I wish I'd let him. You haven't no more sense that a locoed sheep."

ABRUPTLY Chipmunk Marsh stopped. He had turned and was gaping at an old man who, astride a jogging buckskin pony, was leading a slim, high-headed bay horse down the street. A horse named Comet.

"Hey, you," Chipmunk Marsh ran toward the oldster. "Where—how come—Did Agate—" He caught himself.

"If you're 'little feller' Marsh—and I guess you are—I was hired to fetch this here hoss to town for you. All the way from my sheep camp over on Red Slope." The old man grinned. "Yep. The feller that was ridin' this bay give me a twenty-dollar bill for an old brown hoss I had out at camp."

"Yeah, sure," hooted Hank Layson who, with his boss and the other Rafter A punchers, had crowded around the old sheepman. "What part are you playin' in this crooked deal, Sheepman Smith?"

"Crooked deal?" Sheepman Smith's mild eyes widened. "I didn't know I was in on one. A feller comes by my camp, told me he borrows a hoss from Marsh, a bronc twister that's probably in town today for the celebration."

"Yeah?" Hank Layson snorted. "Let's grab this old sheepherder and toss him in the crick, too."

"I'll kill, sooner or later, the first man that lays a hand on Smith," warned Chipmunk Marsh, his blue eyes blazing.

Perhaps it was the deadly earnestness of Chipmunk Marsh's tone that stopped the advance toward Sheepman Smith who was handing the bay's bridle reins to the owner.

Smith stared around the circle with calm, squinty eyes.

"The feller ridin' yore bay also said you could have his saddle, Marsh. He figgered you'd know about where to find it, on a dead hoss."

"Dead horse?" echoed Jim Winfield. "I don't savvy this a-tall."

"Shut up," Chipmunk Marsh commanded tensely. "What's that ruckus goin' on over there across the street? Get out of my way, Layson. Let me have a look at that big round-shouldered gent hollerin' at Chris Benedict over there. That big feller just comin' outa the saloon."

Chipmunk Marsh pushed his way out where he could see. And what he saw made him stare. One of the Lobert brothers, one of the trio who had tried to steal a valuable sorrel stallion today, was weaving drunkenly toward Chris Benedict, owner of the Three Bar outfit.

"I been lookin' all over for you, Benedict," he shouted. "So you're still the foxy coyote you always was, eh? Forgettin' to pay me and my two brothers for some cattle we trailed onto this range last year. And then, when we show up to collect—and while we happen to be ridin' this range—sendin' us ridin' into a blamed trap. You wanted us to get our heads shot off out there at the Raft—" The eldest Lobert caught himself.

"I never seen you before," Chris Benedict barked, and moved nervously toward a fine black horse that Chipmunk Marsh's cousin, George Possard, had been holding. "I don't know what you mean."

"You'll know by the time I twist yore neck off." Lobert lunged drunkenly toward the owner of the Three Bars, who, in turn, wheeled and leaped astride the fleet black horse which was the same animal that Winfield and his punchers had bet against today. The black that had galloped to victory in the mile race.

Chipmunk Marsh was the next man to

move. He leaped to the saddle of his bay horse. He leaned over the bay's neck, and away he went in pursuit of the black.

If the bay had been ridden far today, he still had his speed and stamina. Gallantly, eagerly, he responded to his master's wishes. And the race was on. A race that began on the main street of Rangeville, that carried across the pole bridge spanning the creek just below town, then out on the broad, level flat beyond. The same flat where other races had been run earlier this afternoon.

IT WAS a race that excited men watched intently, wide-eyed, quietly. Men who saw Chris Benedict urging a swift black horse to his best. Men who breathlessly watched a well-ridden bay horse named Comet streak across the flat to justify his name, and close the distance between himself and the hard-running black.

It did not take quite a mile for the bay horse to close that distance entirely and sweep alongside Chris Benedict's black. Nor did it take long for wiry little Chipmunk Marsh to jerk the gun from Benedict's holster; and bring the owner of the Three Bar back to town at a more leisurely gait, back to the town where curious men waited.

"I knowed blame well the bay could do it! I knowed it all the time."

"Shut up," Chipmunk Marsh commanded, riding up with a pallid, nervous prisoner in tow. "Maybe you'll think I'm lyin' again, but I'm goin' to tell you what happened today. And a couple of you boys keep your eyes on that big drunk gent there, the one that tried to get his hands on Benedict. His name's Lobert."

"We're watchin' him," yelled Jim Winfield.

Chipmunk Marsh then told them about the attempted theft of the sorrel stallion, told them how he had surprised the three Lobert brothers, and told them who the Loberts were.

"I've heard of 'em," Jim Winfield said in angry tones. "That must be the other two of 'em comin' out of the saloon. And with them Three Bar riders. Don't let none of 'em get away, fellers. They all knowed my sorrel stud was s'posed to be stolen today, and while we was celebratin'."

Eagerly the Rafter A punchers tied into the opposition. Fists flew wildly, and two or three half-drawn guns went off in the excitement. Chris Benedict tried to bowl his captor from the saddle with a treacherous blow, but Chipmunk Marsh, a sorry sight with the coating of dust, mud now, on his wet clothes, leaped from his bay and bore Benedict to the ground with him. Nor could the latter, bigger though he was, take the punishment the wrathful little bronc fighter was dealing out.

Around the spot where Chipmunk Marsh and his prisoner battled raged other battles. Spurs jangled, boot heels jarred the ground and wild profanity filled the air. Yet, when the dust cleared away, it was the Rafter A bunch that had won victory. It was lanky Hank Layson, much battered and bruised and out of breath, who stood victorious over Chipmunk Marsh's straw-haired cousin, George Possard.

"Give me back that saddle blanket of mine!" Hank Layson yelled at the man he had conquered.

"Yeah," Possard moaned. "It's yourn, all right."

"You always was a light-fingered coyote, Straw," said Chipmunk Marsh in disgust.

"If he was any good he wouldn't be workin' for Chris Benedict so long," said Jim Winfield who stood gripping the arm of the eldest, and much subdued, Lobert brother. "All right, Benedict. Are you denyin' the truth that I just choked outa this snake? That you told him and his brother where he could steal a thousand-dollar stud today?"

A little numbed by the punishment from Chipmunk's quick and active fists, Benedict stood there, blinking with swelling eyes.

"And are you denyin' that a certain bunch of cattle you bought last fall was stolen stock?" Jim Winfield went on. "You knew they was stolen when you bought 'em from the Loberts, didn't you?"

"I—I was gettin' hard up, Winfield," pleaded the rival cowman. "I had to do the best I could. I'm pullin' out, leavin' the mess I've got the Three Bar in, and never comin' back."

"Good," snapped Winfield. "Take yore hootowl riders, take the Lobert brothers, and get off this range. You'd al-

ready been gone, yoreself, if Chipmunk's bay horse hadn't been faster'n your black. But I'm glad he brought you back here, made you own up to bein' the dirty crook you've always been."

ANGERED at what they had learned, the cowboys still yearned for more revenge.

"Run 'em outa town, all the Three Bar outfit," someone yelled.

It was not long before they were all gone. Then a smiling, apologetic Jim Winfield turned to Chipmunk March. "I'm writin' you a check, so you can go over to the store and buy yourself some clean clothes," the ranch owner said.

"I'm buyin' his clothes, and stakin' him to a night of celebration," called Hank Layson. "It was me that throwed him in the crick, 'fore he had a chance to talk."

"Me too," said Sam Lockridge. "I'll fork every cent I've got left over to him."

"Never mind, gents," said Chipmunk Marsh. "I should've told you I had a cousin workin' at the Three Bar. But he's such a no-good coyote. And it could have looked like me and him had fixed up a deal on that hoss race."

"Here's yore check," said Jim Winfield. "Three hundred dollars. Not but what you've been worth a lot more than that to me today. Cripes, by the time me and the boys might've got home after the dance tonight, the Loberts could've been clean off the range with that sorrel stud."

"That's one reason I rode him to town, even if he ain't much of a saddle horse yet," said Chipmunk March. Then he added, smiling, "And to save myself a four-mile walk."

"Do as you like with him from now on," said Jim Winfield. "You're handlin' all the Rafter A horses from now on. Yep. Boss of the horse herd. Are you other boys backin' up my judgment?"

"Dang right," whooped Hank Layson, along with the others. Then the gangling puncher, his conscience tormented by the sight of Chipmunk Marsh's wet clothes, grabbed the little bronc fighter and bore him across the street to the store.

Next Issue: THE HORSE-HOLDER, a Novelet by Wes Fargo

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Lamour's gun blazed as he ducked under his horse's neck

...ottomless soap-hole in the badlands ... could not hide Fox Lamour's guilt!

THE DESERT'S LIVING DEAD

By GUNNISON STEELE

FOX LAMOUR stirred like a huge rattler in his saddle behind the boulder. He leaned forward to peer eagerly across the desert and the pale shafts of moonlight showed the cunning and cruelty on his thin, dark face. He huddled there, head on one side, listening.

At first he could hear only the low whisper of the night wind that blew interminably across the desert. Then, dimly, he caught another sound—the sound of hoofs against hard earth. Fox Lamour grinned, and the moonlight gleamed on his gun as he unholstered it. He was pretty sure that here, at last, was old Chesty Peters.

Chesty Peters was partners with young Tully Daw in a little cow ranch a few miles to the west. Tully was a hard-working young gent, while Chesty was a poker-playing, whiskey-loving old hellion, and the two hadn't got along very well lately. In fact, they'd quarreled bitterly in Piute Sink only a few hours ago when Tully had tried to get Chesty Peters out of a poker game with Fox Lamour and a couple of others.

"Half that money you're riskin' is mine," Tully had said angrily. "You lose any of it, and I'll make you wish you hadn't!"

Chesty hadn't lost any of the cow money. He had, in fact, won a couple of hundred dollars from Fox Lamour. Now Lamour aimed to have that money back, and the thousand dollars in cow money with it. He'd ridden on ahead, knowing

that Chesty Peters would take this short-cut across a corner of the desert, and waited there beside the dim trail. It seemed to the tinhorn that he'd been there a long time.

But now, at last, his vigil was ended. He heard a snatch of ribald song, and knew for sure that the approaching rider was Chesty Peters. Then horse and rider came into sight over a little rise, and Chesty's bearded, pot-bellied figure was plain in the bright moonlight. He came slowly along, still humming his ribald tune.

Fox Lamour pulled his hat brim over his eyes and spurred suddenly from behind the boulder, gun in hand.

"Pull up, old man," he said gruffly. "Move crooked, and I'll cut you in two!"

CHESTY'S horse stopped, and the oldster sat looking blankly at the man with the gun. Lamour said impatiently:

"Toss down the money you've got in that belt under your shirt. Quick, blast you!"

Old Chesty yelled out suddenly.

"Like hogwash I will! And the dark don't hide your skunky smell, Fox Lamour! I beat you at poker, and I—" He made a grab for his six-gun.

Lamour's gun blazed and roared as he ducked under his horse's neck. Chesty Peters wilted down in the saddle and tumbled forward to the ground. Lamour peered warily down at the man he'd shot—but old Chesty lay motionless, the moonlight pale and ghostly on his bearded face.

Lamour went quickly forward, stooped and felt with quick greediness under the oldster's shirt. He sucked in his breath with satisfaction as he felt the well-filled money-belt about Chesty's waist. He unbuckled the belt, emptied it, and crammed the banknotes into his own pockets.

He stood a moment, looking down at the still figure. He hadn't figured on killing Chesty Peters, but maybe it was just as well; dead men didn't talk. After a moment, Lamour decided what to do. He caught Chesty's roan and lashed the oldster to the saddle. Then he secured his own horse from a ravine two hundred yards away, mounted and rode to the south, leading the horse with its grim burden behind him.

After a while he reached the badlands on the edge of the desert. Here a tiny stream trickled down out of the foothills, to lose itself gradually in the parched desert sands. Lamour followed the rocky stream bank until he came to a spot he knew.

Between the trickle of water and the steep creek bank was a crusted-over expanse of earth thirty feet wide. The ground looked firm and dry. But Lamour knew that underneath the deceptive crust was a deadly "soap-hole"—an oozy, gluey mass of muck that was a death trap for any living creature that blundered into it.

With callous indifference, Fox Lamour tossed Chesty Peters into the soap-hole. The body plunged through the crust and vanished almost instantly.

Lamour remounted, leaving Chesty's horse to shift for itself, and took a roundabout way back to Piute Sink. He felt pretty cocky over what he'd done. For a long time he'd hated hell-raising old Chesty Peters. And he had more than a thousand dollars for his trouble. He wasn't afraid of the [illegible] being pinned on him, for he'd been very careful to cover his trail. He might be suspected, but nothing could be proved.

THE town of Piute Sink lay on the floor of a tiny valley on the desert edge, with bare slopes rising gently on two sides to rock escarpments. A trickle of cold, clear water, from springs on one of the 'scarps, flowed through the town.

Fox Lamour owned a combination saloon and gambling hall in Piute Sink, sleeping in a back room of the building. Returning late and furtively that night, he drank half a pint of bad whiskey before lying down to sleep. It was almost noon when he awoke.

And it was almost sundown when slender, red-haired Tully Daw rode into town. Tully stopped first at the sheriff's office. Not finding Sheriff Ben Stargoss there, he came quickly along the street to Lamour's Desert Queen saloon, where the paunchy, gray-mustached sheriff stood at the bar with several other men. Lamour sat at a table at the back of the room, toying with a deck of cards, waiting for a sucker.

Tully Daw went straight to the bar.

"Sheriff, have you seen Chesty Peters?"

"Not since last midnight," Sheriff Stargoss said. "He left for home. He was pretty drunk. Didn't he show up?"

"No, he didn't."

"Likely decided to sleep it off, and ain't woke up yet."

Tully Daw shook his red head.

"Something worse. Chesty's bronc showed up at the ranch about noon today. without Chesty, and there was blood on the saddle."

Fox Lamour, watching, saw quick interest strike at the faces of the men in the room. He got up and, along with the others, went to the bar.

"Did, huh?" Ben Stargoss said slowly. "What you figure's happened?"

"It seems pretty plain," Tully declared. "Somebody waylaid Chesty between here and the ranch, mebbe knowin' he had more than a thousand dollars on him. There was a ruckus, and Chesty was hurt, mebbe killed."

"Why didn't you backtrack his bronc?"

"I tried that, but I lost the trail over in the badlands on the desert edge. The badlands would be miles out of Chesty's way—if he was there, he was carried."

"Who'd want to kill an old gent like Chesty?"

"You're the sheriff," Tully said. "It's your job to find out about that. I been lookin' for him all day, without any luck."

Fox Lamour spoke up quickly, smoothly.

"Looks like it ought not to be so much trouble to figure out who done it. Far as I know, kid, *you're* the only one who's had trouble with old Chesty lately."

Tully whirled.

"Meanin' what by that crack, tinhorn?" he demanded.

LAMOUR seemed flustered.

"Why—I just mean you had a quarrel with him in town last night. Everybody knows about it."

"Sure, I did." Tully Daw looked uneasy. "Me and Chesty had brought a bunch of steers to town and sold 'em. Chesty still figures I'm a baby, so he said he'd take care of the money. Then he went and got roarin' drunk, and got into a poker game. I tried to get him to give me the cow money, especially my half, but he was mule-stubborn and wouldn't do it. It might have sounded like a bad quarrel, but it wasn't; both of us would have forgotten about it by mornin'."

"I dunno," muttered the sheriff. "I heard about the quarrels you and him been havin'. I heard you made some threats last night before you left town."

Tully flushed.

"I told you about that. Them little spats didn't mean a thing—"

"That's what *you* say," Lamour sneered. "Sheriff, you know what I think? I think Tully Daw waylaid his own partner on the trail and gunned him. They'd been fussin' lately, and he saw a chance to get rid of Chesty and glom onto the whole kaboodle."

"Why, you lyin' snake!" Tully yelled and grabbed for his gun.

But the old sheriff was ahead of him. Quickly he snaked Tully's six-shooter from its holster and covered the angry redhead with it.

"Easy, kid! I reckon you better come with me."

"You crazy enough to think I'd bushwhack old Chesty, Stargoss?" Tully cried.

"Don't matter what I think," Stargoss grunted. "I've got to go by the evidence. To be on the safe side, I'll just lock you up till I get to the bottom of this."

Tully stood with slender body tense for a moment, then he shrugged.

"If you want to show how dumb you are, go ahead and lock me up. All I want is to find out what's happened to Chesty."

"I'll lock you up, then ride out and look things over," the sheriff said. "Head out for the jail, now—and you better not try no tricks!"

Tully Daw turned and went out the door, followed by Sheriff Stargoss. The jail was around a corner on a side street. By now darkness was settling over Piute Sink.

Highly satisfied with himself, Fox Lamour poured himself a drink. He was still sipping it when, a moment later, a gunshot suddenly blasted the silence. A man yelled somewhere outside, and hoofbeats thudded. Gunfire drummed again, quick and flat.

Those in the saloon surged out onto the street, just as Sheriff Stargoss came reeling from the direction of the jail. Stargoss paused in a shaft of light from a doorway, and he looked like he'd been in a fight with a wildcat. His face was

streaked with blood, his shirt ripped half from his body.

"Tully Daw jumped me when I tried to put him in a cell," he said wrathfully. "He tried to knock my head off. He got away, on my horse, while I was too groggy to shoot straight. Can't trail the young skunk tonight—but, come daylight, I'll want a posse!"

FOX LAMOUR was highly satisfied with the new turn of events. Things were working out fine. Tully Daw, by running away like that, had made his guilt seem plain. If anybody had suspected Lamour of the killing, the suspicion was gone now. In high spirits, he invited everybody to drink on the house.

He rode with the posse that left Piute Sink at daylight. Tully Daw had headed for the badlands, and there the posse lost his trail. They spent most of the remainder of the day looking for sign of old Chesty Peters.

To Lamour's amusement, the old sheriff didn't even find the plain trail he'd left from the point of the killing into the badlands. They didn't come within five miles of the soap-hole where he'd left Chesty Peters. Tired and ill-humored they returned to Piute Sink a while before sundown.

Inwardly jubilant, Lamour shook his head gloomily.

"Looks like Tully Daw won't hang for killin' his partner, after all," he said. "Well, come inside everybody—the drinks are on the house."

Sheriff Stargoss went with the score of possemen and townsmen into the Desert Queen. Silently, they poured their drinks.

"I figure we been on a wild goose chase," a posseman said. "Chesty Peters is likely layin' out up in the hills with that quart he left town with."

"I figure different," Lamour said. "I figure Tully Daw killed him, and hid the body."

Suddenly there was a yell outside:

"Come out here, you gents, and see who in Tophet this is comin'!"

Drawn by the urgency of the voice, Fox Lamour, along with a score of other men, surged outside. A puncher stood on the boardwalk, pointing toward the rock escarpment above the town to the west. The sun had gone down, etching the rimrock sharply against the crimson sky, throwing shadows across the slope itself.

A figure had just dropped off the rimrock and was coming down the slope toward the lower end of the street—rather, it was reeling like a drunken man, or one badly hurt. The reeling figure was too indistinct for recognition. Nevertheless, as he watched, something slithered like an icy spider along Fox Lamour's spine.

Suddenly the figure stumbled and fell.

"By gosh, that gent's bad hurt!" a puncher exclaimed. "Mebbe I better go help him along."

"Wait—he's gettin' up ag'in!" Sheriff Stargoss said. "We'll see what this is about."

The figure on the slope struggled slowly to its knees, then to its feet, and shuffled on toward the watchers. The man's head had fallen forward on his chest, so that the floppy old hat hid his features. About him there was a queer, grayish look.

Lamour stood very still, and a cold, numb feeling crept slowly over him. About that reeling, pot-bellied figure there was a ghastly familiarity. Sudden realization hit him like a blow: That figure had a grayish look because it was covered, from head to feet, with slimy-looking *mud!*

"By fire'n blazes!" Stargoss blurted suddenly. "Unless I'm plumb crazy, that's old Chesty Peters!"

A MURMUR of amazement ran through the crowd. Quick panic gibbering through him, Lamour's eyes probed at the oncoming figure and in his mind was the certain conviction that he'd made an awful blunder. Old Chesty Peters, when Lamour had tossed him into the soap-hole, hadn't been quite dead. Somehow, he'd gotten out of the deadly muck. And now, by some ghastly miracle, he had staggered back from the land of the dead to point out the one who had tried to kill him.

"It's Chesty, all right, and looks like he's been through Hades," a townsman said. "It's plain somebody tried to beef him and Chesty's come back to tell who the snake was. We'll find out whether it was Tully Daw or not!"

The stumbling figure, entering the lower end of the street, was less than a hundred yards away. The watchers saw

that the slimy mud had dried, coating his body like a shroud.

Fox Lamour inched toward the edge of the crowd, eyes riveted on a big roan gelding at a rack fifty feet away. He had no time to get the stolen money from his office safe for in just a moment old Chesty Peters would point a muddy, accusing finger at him.

Sheriff Stargoss' voice lashed out sharply.

"What's the hurry, Lamour? Ain't afraid to face old Chesty, are you?"

Lamour whirled, a furious, hateful oath ripping from his lips, and snatched at his pearl-handled gun. The old lawman's own gun roared, spat flame and lead. Lamour grunted, fell backward to the ground, his unfired gun thudding to the dust. Then he clawed to his feet and lunged toward the hitch-rack.

But half a dozen hands clutched at the tinhorn killer and held him helpless. He fought savagely for a moment, then went limp in their hands.

"I—I didn't do it!" he whimpered. "It was Tully Daw that shot him and tossed him into that soap-hole—I saw him do it. . . ."

"Lyin' won't help you now," Stargoss said grimly. "When you tried to get away, you the same as signed a confession. Take a good look at the man you thought was about to accuse you of robbery and attempted murder, Lamour."

The blocky figure, no longer stumbling and slumped, his head held erect now, was approaching swiftly. Lamour stared, a stunned, bewildered look on his dark face.

"That's not Chesty Peters," he said hoarsely. "It—it's Tully Daw!"

IT *WAS* Tully Daw, his slender figure padded to give it an appearance of paunchiness, his clothes covered with dried mud.

"That's right, Lamour," he said slowly. "And this mud came from the same soap-hole you tossed Chesty Peters into two nights ago after you'd killed and robbed him. I lied a little when I rode into town and said I didn't know what had happened to Chesty.

"I'd found blood on the ground where somebody's stopped him out there in the desert. From there, I followed the trail of two horses into the badlands, and I found Chesty's horse. It took me a couple of hours to fish old Chesty out of the soap-hole.

"I knew everything then, except who the skunk was that had killed and robbed Chesty. I figured it was you, Lamour, but I had to have proof. So I slipped into town, earlier in the day, and me and the sheriff rigged up a scheme to trap the killer."

"And it worked," Sheriff Stargoss chuckled. "A blind man could have followed that trail you made into the badlands with my hoss last night, kid. And that chicken blood I smeared on my face still smells. You denyin' you're guilty, Lamour?"

But Fox Lamour didn't answer. He was staring wide-eyed toward the rimrock where an upthrust spire of rock, etched darkly against the red sky, looked incredibly like a gallows.

Coming Next Issue: Complete Novelets by ED EARL REPP, TOM GUNN and WES FARGO—Plus Many Other Exciting Stories!

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign

Of Tired Kidneys

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(Adv.)

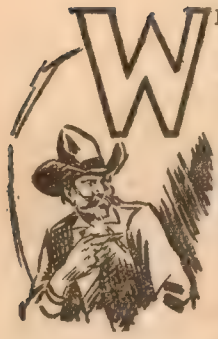
PAINTED TRAIL

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

Sign painter Sam Twigger goes on the prod to hunt down a murderous enemy—and prepares for a showdown when he finds his quarry at the town of Saffron Gulch!

CHAPTER I

Midday Stop



WHERE a high ledge of smooth-faced rock cast a spot of shade, Sam Twigger stopped his one-horse covered wagon.

It was about midday, the sun was blistering hot, and a hot wind sweeping across the semi-arid land carried with it swirls of dust-reflected sand.

Sam Twigger remained on the wagon seat, his legs crossed, body bent forward, his hands folded in his lap. He looked forlorn and tired. His clothes were almost threadbare. There were cracks in his boots. He was small, wiry, and almost fifty as to age. A thin scraggy beard decorated his chin, and his hair was thin, long and unkempt. His battered hat had holes in it. His shirt was worn out at the elbows.

But this poverty in appearance was only a pose with Sam Twigger. In the money-belt fastened securely around his waist next to his skin, he had more than five hundred dollars.

The horse appeared to be about ready for the boneyard. He stood with drooping head and his front legs spread apart as if to brace up a body about to collapse. He was a bay, but now his coat was so covered with dust and salty lather that his color scarcely could be told.

The wagon was an ordinary single-horse farm wagon on which a canvas top had been constructed. The canvas was worn, weather-stained, and patched in many places. On each side of the top was a faded black sign which read:

SAM TWIGGER, SIGN PAINTER

Inside the wagon were pots and cans of paint, brushes, a small drum of kerosene, some linseed oil, and other articles Sam Twigger used in his trade. Also in the wagon was a small tent rolled up, and blankets, cooking utensils, and a box containing a meager supply of food.

Sam Twigger rested for a moment, then sighed and got down from the wagon seat like a man almost exhausted from fatigue and the heat of the day. From the rear of the wagon, he took a bucket. Fastened to the back of the vehicle between the wheels was a water keg with a spigot. Sam Twigger filled the bucket with lukewarm water from the keg, and carried it around in front so the horse could drink.

WHILE the horse drank, Sam Twigger stood with his feet far apart and his fists planted against his hips, and inspected the immediate terrain.

The trail curved ahead across the parched land like a dirty yellow ribbon. In the distance was a range of hills. At the base of the range, and at the end of the trail, Sam Twigger knew, was the little town of Saffron Gulch. That was his present destination.

When the horse had finished drinking, Sam Twigger brought out an old nosebag with some oats in it, and fastened it to the bridle. The horse began eating. Twigger took a soiled bandanna handkerchief from his hip pocket and wiped the perspiration and dust from his face, and with a corner of the handkerchief carefully wiped the dust and sweat from his watery eyes.

He walked around to the back of the wagon again and reached into it. He brought forth a large stencil cut in heavy cardboard. The stains of black paint on it revealed that it had been used often.

Sam Twigger got a can of black paint and a brush out of the wagon, and carried them and the stencil to the ledge of rock. He selected a smooth space about five feet from the ground, held the stencil against it, and passed the paint-dripping brush across the face of the stencil.

A SWIFT-MOVING ACTION NOVELET

As Ed Boles lifted the gun, Sam Twigger sprang from the scaffold

Removing the stencil carefully, he backed away from the ledge and looked at his work. The smooth surface of the rock had taken the paint well. Sam Twigger stepped forward with a smaller brush and smoothed some of the smears. It was a good sign now. It read:

DAVID DOANE
I AM ON YOUR TRAIL

Sam Twigger had painted that sign on numerous rocks along many trails during the past few months.

He often had left it near towns, so all who rode past could read. He had used gallons of paint, and had worn out many brushes and several stencils.

Now he put the paint, stencils and brushes back into his wagon, and went around in front again.

He lifted the top of the lopsided wagon seat. From a hidden space beneath it, he took out a gun-belt with filled cartridge loops, from which dangled a holster holding an old six-gun.

The horse was still munching oats, his eyes closed in peaceful content. Sam Twigger walked away for a distance and looked around. About a score of paces from him was a stunted, wind-torn and lightning-shattered tree with a bole about a foot in diameter.

Sam Twigger stood facing the tree. Suddenly, he spread his feet far apart, and bent forward slightly. His right hand darted downward swiftly and whipped gun from leather. The gun flamed and roared three times, quickly.

Slipping the smoking weapon back into the holster, he strode to the tree over the rough ground.

He found three bullet-holes in the tree trunk, and inspected them carefully.

"Yup!" He spoke aloud in a squeaky voice. "One would have got him right between the eyes, the second in the heart, and the third in his middle. Any of 'em would have killed him. That's the way I want it. Want to make sure that it's finished and done the first time. Got to have it over with!"

He returned to the wagon with slow steps, cleaned the gun carefully and oiled and reloaded it, took off the belt and stowed it away beneath the seat of the wagon again, and wiped the oil from his hands.

The horse had finished eating. Sam Twigger took the nosebag off, and gave the horse another drink of water.

Then he got upon the seat of the wagon and gathered up the reins. He clucked and jerked on the reins slightly to get the jaded horse started.

He swung the wagon back into the dusty trail, sat hunched over on the seat, surveyed the country through eyes half-closed against the glare of the sun, and traveled on slowly toward the town of Saffron Gulch.

CHAPTER II

Twigger Finds a Friend

UNTIL a few weeks before, Saffron Gulch had been nothing more than a sleepy trading post for several prosperous ranches in two valleys behind the range of hills.

Then, a persistent old prospector had made a gold strike in an ancient dry watercourse which had drained the hills into the semi-arid land below.

Saffron Gulch was the town nearest the strike. Now, it scarcely knew itself. The few old-timers there were engulfed and lost in the flood of newcomers. The town had become a scene of feverish activity.

Tent houses dotted the hillside. Larger tents housed the merchandise until permanent structures could be erected. Carpenters were getting double pay, and heavy wagons with four and six-horse teams of mules were freighting in lumber and other building materials.

The usual motley crew had rushed in as soon as the strike had been made public. Gold-seekers, gamblers, liquor [illegible] followers came in a steady [illegible] bewildered the regular residents of Saffron Gulch.

Sam Twigger began to see signs of this feverish activity as soon as he turned from the trail into a broader one which ran into Saffron Gulch from the distant county seat.

Vehicles and riders passed him, all making speed and seemingly oblivious to the heat and dust. Sam Twigger gave the others plenty of room. He was in no particular hurry. He only wanted to reach Saffron Gulch before night came. His horse wouldn't hurry anyhow.

He followed the twisting trail through a short narrow canyon and up a steep hill—and there was the town. At the end of the town's one street, he turned off. The street was packed with vehicles, horses and men afoot, rushing in and out of the buildings and tents.

Sam Twigger drove the wagon behind the row of buildings toward a wide open space. Others already were camped there. They hailed Twigger with some amusement when they looked at his outfit, and directed him to an unclaimed spot where he could make his camp. Some wild grass grew at the edge of the clearing and the place was only a couple of hundred yards from the town well.

Sam Twigger spotted his wagon, and picketed the tired horse where he could nibble at the sparse grass. He gathered fuel and built a little fire, and as the sunset streaked the western sky with banners of scarlet and gold, he made coffee, cooked bacon and warmed beans, and ate his supper.

Trudging to the town well with a couple of buckets, he brought them back, watered the horse, and put the second bucket into the wagon. Then he pitched his tattered tent near the wagon, unfolded his cot and thrust it inside, draped his blankets over it, piled his few cooking utensils in a corner, and was established in a new home.

As the soft dusk came, he lighted an old pipe, fastened the flaps of his tent, and trudged slowly down toward the teeming street.

Saffron Gulch had learned, during these last few weeks, that not all men retired at nightfall and arose at dawn, after the manner of the town's regular citizens.

There was more activity now at night than in the daytime. Newly outfitted prospectors liked to travel in the cool of the moonlighted night to the distant gulches. Others came in for supplies and recreation.

THE town's one regular saloon was jammed with men. Two tent saloons were crowded also. Gamblers had set up their layouts and had plenty of patronage. Peddlers were hawking merchandise along the street.

Back in the seclusion of his tent, Sam Twigger had taken a few small coins out of his money-belt, and now they jangled in his pocket. He walked into the teeming crowd, was elbowed and jostled, and passed unnoticed. That was the way he wanted it. He was not there to attract attention.

Taking his time, he walked along one side of the street, then crossed over and went along the other side, scrutinizing the business establishments and getting acquainted with the town. He looked at the men, as if searching for somebody in particular.

After this inspection of the town, he entered Saffron Gulch's old saloon. He had decided to look at the crowds in the liquor tent afterward. Saffron Gulch's old saloon seemed to be a sort of headquarters.

He eased his way to the bar. It was some time before one of the busy bartenders could attend to his wants. Sam Twigger asked for whiskey, put a coin down on the bar, and stood there, viewing the men.

Somebody touched him on the shoulder.

"If you're intendin' to drink, go ahead so somebody else can get to the bar," a harsh voice ordered.

Sam Twigger turned his head. A burly, black-haired man was standing at his shoulder. Twigger gulped down the whiskey and stood aside.

"I—I was just thinkin' of somethin'," he said, apologetically. "I wouldn't deprive anybody of his liquor."

"You don't look like yuh had nothin' to think with," the burly man told him. "I'll bet yuh're an old desert rat who thinks he's the only feller who knows all about gold and prospectin'. Yuh're one of those loco old codgers who spends his life wanderin' around the hills, talkin' to a flea-bitten burro, and livin' on some fool's grubstakes."

"I ain't ever prospected in my life," Sam Twigger protested. "I'm a sign painter."

"Don't give me an argument, yuh horned toad," shouted the burly man, belligerently. "Get away from here!"

Sam Twigger noticed that the men near them were backing off from the bar. So he guessed that this black-haired man had a reputation for brawling. Sam Twigger's swift glance revealed his tormentor was not wearing a gun. A camp bully, probably, and handy with his fists.

Sam Twigger started to turn away but somebody leaving the bar jostled against him and threw him off balance. He reeled back and bumped against the bully.

"What are you tryin' to do now, shove me around?" the black-haired man bawled. He grabbed Sam Twigger by the front of his shirt and thrust him back against the bar, bending him over until Sam Twigger was afraid his spine would crack. The collar of his shirt was gripped so tightly he began to strangle. He was unable to speak or move.

The black-haired giant shook him, half-lifted him up, and jerked him forward again.

"I ought to smash in yore weazened old face!" he howled, like a man enraged. "Yep. That's what I'll do. I'll beat yuh to a bloody pulp!"

THE giant drew back a hamlike fist. He towered over his slighter victim. His ugly face was cruel, bestial as he gloated.

"That'll be enough, I reckon," a new voice said.

The wrist of Sam Twigger's tormentor was grabbed suddenly from behind, and wrenched powerfully backward. The bully bellowed with rage. He let go of Sam Twigger and whirled around to confront the man who had interfered.

Sam Twigger looked at the newcomer, too. He didn't seem to be more than thirty. He was tall, and well built, his chin set and determined. His gray eyes had a glint in them as he watched the swaggering giant. The bigger man hesitated. He did not like the odds now. His new opponent was young and looked disconcertingly competent.

"Better not horn in here, Bert Hanes," the bully warned. "This affair ain't any of yore business."

"I'm makin' it my business, Ed Boles. Why don't you pick out somebody your own age and size, some time. You're an overgrown coward!"

"So I'm an overgrown coward, am I?"

"You are," the younger man replied, without the slightest hesitation.

"Mebbe yuh'd like to step out into the street and tell me that again."

"There's no reason for steppin' out into the street. I'll tell it to you again right here. I said you're an overgrown coward."

Sam Twigger saw the blow starting, and feared for the man who had come to his rescue. The heavy man at the bar swung up his fist hard, plainly intending to make a quick end of it. The younger man bent his head aside at just the right moment, and allowed the great fist to go over his shoulder.

Before the big man could recover, the younger man's fists lashed out. One blow caught the heavy man on the side of his head, staggering him, turning him halfway around. The second got him on the point of the chin, and he crashed to the floor.

"Now, let's both of us get out of here," the young man said to Sam Twigger. "Somebody'll toss a bucket of water on this cuss and wake him up."

The crowd parted, and Sam Twigger and his young rescuer went into the teeming street, where they turned sharply to the right.

"I'm shore obliged to you for what you did," Sam Twigger said, in his squeaky voice. "If he'd hit me, I mebbe would have died."

"I was glad to have an excuse for smashin' Ed Boles. He's been ridin' over too many folks around here the last few weeks. He works for the boss of one of the liquor tents."

"I had no idea that there'd be such a big crowd in Saffron Gulch," Sam Twigger said. "This gold strike took me by surprise."

"I wish it'd never happened! We were peaceful and quiet here before the gold-rushers came. My name's Bert Hanes."

"Yup. I heard that man call you so. I'm Sam Twigger."

"I used to ride for the Three Star ranch. But I'm workin' in town here now, helpin' 'Big Bill' Clawson, the blacksmith. He's got more than he can do, fixin' rigs, shoein' horses and sharpenin' tools for the gold-rushers."

"More money in it for you, I reckon, than in bein' a cowman," Sam Twigger said, as they emerged from another jam of human beings on the walk.

"There's more to it than that," Bert Hanes replied. "Clawson's got a daughter, Betty. She and me are intendin' to get married one of these days. With all these roughs in town, I wanted to be near her, to protect her. One man has been pesterin' her a lot. And that Ed Boles got fresh with her last week. That's another reason why I was glad to smash him tonight."

"Mebbe he'll be comin' after you for revenge," Sam Twigger hinted. "Mebbe you made an enemy."

"I can take care of myself."

"Yup, in a fist fight. But his kind might do some sneakin' up behind when you ain't lookin', and use a gun."

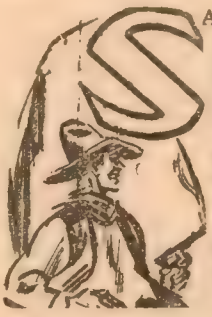
"I can take care of myself that way, too," Bert Hanes replied. "I noticed your outfit today when you drove in, Twigger, and watched where you camped. So you're a sign painter?"

"That's right. I'm a good one, too. I travel from town to town, makin' a kind of livin'."

"Let's take a stroll over to your tent," Bert Hanes suggested. "We'll smoke and talk. I'd like to get better acquainted. I might be able to send some sign paintin' work your way."

CHAPTER III

Information



SAM TWIGGER built up his fire and put the coffeepot on. Then he and Bert Hanes sat around and smoked.

A bright moon was shining. Lanterns were burning in some of the tents on the hillside. From the distant street came the din of Saffron Gulch's new, feverish night life.

"I like to see every man get along," Bert Hanes said. "I know I can coax Bill Clawson into havin' you paint a sign for his blacksmith shop, now that he's makin' good money."

"That'd be fine," Sam Twigger said.

"And the Three Star bunch will come ridin' into town for their payday spree. I'll get the boss to have you paint a big board sign with the name of the ranch on it, to put over the gate, and maybe another showin' the Three Star brand."

"Well, thanks!"

"And these new outfits openin' up in town—they'll be wantin' signs painted," Bert Hanes added. "If one of 'em gets a sign made, all the others will have 'em, too. There'll be quite a lot of work for you hereabouts."

"I'm obliged," Sam Twigger said. "All this hurlyburly is right bewilderin' to me. I don't like crowds much. Who's the big boss of the town, if any?"

"He's David Doane," Bert Hanes replied.

Sam Twigger sucked in his breath sharply. David Doane, the man he had sought for so long! At last their trails had crossed.

Hanes did not notice the expression that came into Sam Twigger's face. He was looking at the fire.

"Dave Doane came to Saffron Gulch about a year ago," he explained. "He bought a small ranch 'way back in one of the valleys. He's got a half-interest in the store here, too. When this gold rush started, he sort of took charge of things. He's makin' a heap of money."

"What kind of man is he?" Twigger asked.

"Well, he's a loud, big man—that kind. Acts like he owns the earth and everything on it. He's right sharp in a business deal, with no mercy for anybody, but I guess he's honest enough. But he's tied up with some who ain't."

"How's that?" Sam Twigger asked.

"An ornery cuss named Jack Bamney is Doane's right-hand man. Bamney runs the ranch, when he ain't in town liquorin' up."

"Liquor swiller, huh?"

"Shore," said Bert Hanes. "He's just natural mean, too. Always packs a gun, and acts tough. Maybe he is tough. He's bragged around that he's killed more'n one man, and it wouldn't surprise me any to learn he has."

"And he works for Doane, huh?" Twigger asked.

"That's right. Bamney came here about a month after Doane did, and I think Doane must have sent for him. They'd known each other before."

"I'd like to see this man Doane, and size him up," Sam Twigger said.

"He left town a couple of days ago, to look at some minin' claims. If they look good, he'll probably be buyin' 'em for about a fourth of what they're worth. The owners will have to sell, or face Jack Bamney in a gunfight. Then Doane would get the claims anyway. Doane ought to be back any time now."

The hot coffee made tears come into his watery eyes. Probably they would have come anyhow. He was thinking of that day almost a year before, when bullets had taken the life of his sister's husband, and left her alone with three small children. He had even tried to comfort her, knowing no comfort was possible.

Sam Twigger had told his sister somebody would have to pay for that. He had sworn to trail the man responsible, and make him pay. Now he would shoot it out with the guilty man when they met. He had planned just what he would say and do.

For his brother-in-law's death had been plain murder. The flaming, lead-slinging gun of a wanton killer had made Sam Twigger's sister a widow and her children fatherless. The killer had been caught in a poker game.

Sam Twigger and his sister had a wealthy uncle who was a cattleman. He had handed Sam Twigger a supply of money.

"Find the man, and kill him!" had been the order. "Use yore own methods."

So, Sam Twigger had started his campaign as a traveling sign painter, posing as a poor man scarcely able to get along. Had painted his signs along the trails, hoping to lure the killer into the open. The man he sought had moved to new pastures and was somewhere in the West. That was all Sam Twigger had known when he started out.

Now, he had found David Doane!

"You come down to the blacksmith shop first thing in the mornin'," Bert Hanes was saying. "Big Bill will want a big sign across the front of his shop over the door. He'll pay you well."

"I'm obliged!" Sam Twigger said.

"If that Ed Boles pesters you again, let me know."

"You'd better watch out for him yore own self," Twigger cautioned.

"I'll do that." Bert Hanes finished his coffee, rolled and lighted a fresh cigarette, and got up. "The Three Star bunch should come to town about day after tomorrow," he added. "You'll like the gang. And I'll talk you up to the boss, so he'll give you a sign-paintin' job."

Hanes said good-night and departed. Sam Twigger smothered the fire with dirt, made sure the horse was all right, inspected his wagon, and entered his tent.

He did not light his lantern. Picking up his blankets, he slipped out of the tent again, on the dark side, and kept to the deeper shadows as he crept furtively to the fringe of brush at the edge of the clearing. There, he made a bed on the ground, rolled in his blankets and went to sleep.

Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy Shorty Watts Battle Gila Monsters and Human Cobras in THE CIRCLE 7 CRIME, Novelet by Tom Gunn in Next Issue!

"So [illegible] Bamney does Doane's gunfightin' for him," Twigger asked.

THE younger man shook his head.

"That's what folks around here think, although Bamney hasn't done any around Saffron Gulch yet. Bamney is one of the reasons I'm workin' in town in the blacksmith shop."

"How come?"

"Jack Bamney's got his eye on Betty Clawson, and Big Bill hasn't time to watch over her right. So I'm workin' at the shop. The Clawsons live in a little cottage right behind it, and either me or Big Bill is around in case anybody tries to pester Betty."

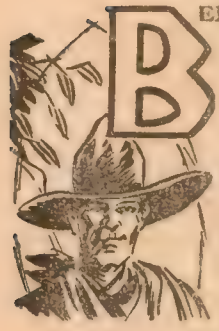
The coffee was ready now. Sam Twigger filled two tin cups and offered one to his guest. Bert Hanes sipped the coffee slowly. Sam Twigger was looking down at the lights along the busy street.

So he had found David Doane at last! Months before, he had started on the quest, knowing only that Doane was somewhere in one of three Western states. He had painted his signs of warning, hoping Doane would look him up. That was the way he had hoped to get in touch with Doane.

He had not known that Doane was in Saffron Gulch. He had come in this direction simply because it was a trail he had not followed before. And now, if David Doane was here, Sam Twigger was approaching the end of his mission.

CHAPTER IV

Twigger Repays a Debt



BERT HANES talked "Big Bill" Clawson into having a sign painted on the front of the blacksmith shop.

Before noon the following day, Sam Twigger had a ramshackle scaffolding erected with a ladder at the end of it, and had his pots of paints and brushes on the scaffold and had started work.

He blocked out the letters with chalk, and began painting. Before he had been at it long, the usual crowd had gathered. That the blacksmith shop and the Clawson cottage were off to one side made no difference. The spectators gathered and watched, interested, then went away.

Sam Twigger worked carefully and well, for he took a pride in his lettering. He gave the crowd below scant attention.

He quit to eat the midday meal, then went up the ladder to the scaffold and began work again. Bert Hanes came from the blacksmith shop a few times to observe the progress of the sign. Clawson did, too. The owner of one of the tent stores stopped and told Sam Twigger that he wanted a sign painted next.

It was the middle of the afternoon, and Twigger had the sign almost finished, when he heard a bellow below him.

"Hey! You, up there!"

Holding a dripping brush, Sam Twigger looked down. He saw a huge man dressed in good clothes and wearing riding boots. A wide-rimmed sombrero was shoved to the back of his head. He stood with fists planted against his hips, and he was plainly angry.

"What's wanted?" Sam Twigger asked.

"You come down here! I want to talk to you. I'm David Doane."

"I'll be right down," Sam Twigger said.

He put his brush across the top of the paint pot, wiped his stained hands on a rag, and went down the ladder slowly and carefully. The group of men who had been watching him paint moved back to a distance.

Sam Twigger reached the ground, hitched up his pants, and walked forward until he was standing in front of David Doane.

"What's your name?" Doane asked.

"Sam Twigger."

"Are you the hombre who's been paintin' all them signs on rocks along the trails, sayin' as how you were on my trail."

"Yup, I painted the signs."

"What are you on my trail for?" Doane demanded. "Here I am, if you want to see me."

Sam Twigger gulped as he looked at the big, arrogant man.

"I've been paintin' them signs for several months," he managed to say, finally. "I started paintin' 'em in Texas, and now I'm over here in Arizona."

"Why?" Doane asked.

"Well, I—I was hired to paint 'em."

"Who hired you?"

"A man over Texas way," Sam Twigger replied.

"Well, what's his name? And why is he on my trail?"

"I swore not to tell his name when he gave me the job, and I can't break my word. He just gave me money and told me to go ahead and paint 'em as I traveled."

"I ain't got any enemy in Texas, far as I know," Doane said. "I ought to bust your face in for paintin' them signs."

"But it—it was just a job," Sam Twigger squeaked. "I'm a sign painter, and have to make a livin'."

"Now that you know where I am, are you goin' to let this hombre know?"

"No, sir. I don't have to let him know."

Doane's face creased into an uncertain grin.

"He's just somebody tryin' to make me nervous, huh? Well, I'm bucklin' on a gun today, and I'm keepin' it buckled on. And I've got a good man to guard me, too. If this unkn[illegible] shows up here, he'll get shot."

"Yes, sir," Sam Twigger said.

"And you quit paintin' t[illegible] Hear me?"

"I won't paint any more of 'em," Twigger promised.

"All right! Get back up there and finish your work. When you're done, I want you to paint a new sign for the store. I own a half interest in it. And I'm havin' somebody keep an eye on you, too. So don't try to slip away from Saffron Gulch."

"I won't be ready to leave for some time, maybe," Sam Twigger said. "There's work for me here."

Doane strode away, and Sam Twigger slowly climbed the ladder and picked up his paint brush.

It was hot on the scaffold, for the sun beat down upon it. Sam Twigger mopped his face with his bandanna frequently. He was hurrying to get the sign done before night.

The heat drove the group of curious watchers away after a time. Bill Clawson came out of the smithy and looked up, and said the sign was a fine one. Bert Hanes did likewise, then went back into the smithy, where the anvil rang continuously as Clawson and Bert Hanes worked.

A slouching figure left the street and came toward the blacksmith shop. Sam Twigger painted on, not noticing. The man who approached looked up at him and sneered, then gave his attention elsewhere. Coming to the corner of the smithy, he moved furtively to the open door.

"Bert Hanes!" he called. The anvil ceased ringing. "Bert Hanes, come out here a minute!"

Holding his dripping brush, Sam Twigger glanced down. His body stiffened. It was Ed Boles down there, and Boles was holding a gun. He had his feet spread far apart, yet was weaving on them. Ed Boles was drunk and dangerous.

As Sam Twigger watched and wondered whether he should shout a warning and run the risk of getting shot. Bert Hanes came to the open door, blinking because of the bright sunshine outside.

Hanes saw Ed Boles and realized his peril.

"I ain't got a gun on me, Boles," he said.

"And I ain't carin' whether yuh have or not! You smashed me last night. Nobody can smash me like that, and live!"

"You wouldn't shoot down an unarmed man, would you?" Bert Hanes asked.

Boles had retreated a few steps just a little too far away for Bert Hanes to make a quick jump and have a chance at disarming him. Hanes knew that gun would be fired the moment he made a move, and at the distance a miss was practically impossible.

Sam Twigger realized all this. He put his paint brush down into the pot and stooped. "I'm goin' to get yuh, Hanes, armed or not," Ed Boles [illegible]. "You made a fool out of me before a crowd. I'm goin' to fix yuh plenty."

He stepped aside a couple of feet more and lifted his gun slightly. And Sam Twigger sprang.

His body shot down from the scaffold. He crashed upon Ed Boles with all his weight, and grabbed for the gun as the two of them fell to earth. The weapon flew from Boles' hand and landed at Bert Hanes' feet.

Hanes ignored the gun. He sprang forward, and pulled Sam Twigger off. Then, he jerked Ed Boles to his feet, took away his second pistol, and sent him reeling to one side.

"Now, you are goin' to get a beatin'," Hanes said. "Come at me with a gun when I'm not armed, huh? Put up your fists!"

Ed Boles, half insane with rage, roared and rushed. Bert Hanes' fist thudded into his face. Boles gripped him, and they began wrestling and fighting. Clawson came out of the smithy to see what was going on. Somebody in the street yelled, and a crowd came running to see the fight.

"Boles went after Hanes with a gun, when Hanes was unarmed," Sam Twigger explained in his squeaky voice. "There's the gun on the ground. That other one belongs to Boles too. Now, Hanes is smashin' Boles for it."

Clawson picked up both guns and held them. The spectators backed away to let the two men fight. None of them had any sympathy for Ed Boles.

Boles fought like a maniac for a time. He marked Bert Hanes' face, and once sent him reeling backward with a terrific blow. But Hanes recovered before Boles could follow up the advantage.

Hanes fought coolly, methodically. He battered Ed Boles back against the wall of the smithy, and pounded him. Boles struggled into the open again, and the crowd surged back out of the way.

But Hanes had the better of it now. The watchers knew it was only a question of a little time. Hanes was waiting for the right opening, and presently it came. His fists thudded twice, and Ed Boles sprawled in the dirt.

"Bucket of water," Hanes called to Clawson.

The blacksmith brought it out of the smithy. Hanes tossed the water upon Ed Boles' head. He groaned, managed in time to sit up. Hanes jerked him to his feet.

"I'm packin' a gun from now on, Boles," Bert Hanes warned. "After what you tried, I've got a right to shoot on sight. You ain't wanted in Saffron Gulch. Pull stakes!"

Boles did not answer. Somebody in the crowd laughed, and Ed Boles knew he was done in the town. He couldn't be a bully after this.

He staggered away, the crowd parting to let him through. Without looking back, he stumbled toward the liquor tent where he worked. The crowd scattered after Bert Hanes went back into the blacksmith shop.

Sam Twigger followed him in.

"I'm obliged that I had a chance to repay you for what you did for me in the saloon last night," Twigger said.

Bert Hanes grinned.

"It was lucky for me that you did it," he replied. "He was drunk and crazy mad, and he'd have shot me down in cold blood. Like I told him, I'm goin' to pack a gun from now on."

"Me, too," Sam Twigger said, so softly that neither Hanes nor Clawson heard him.

CHAPTER V

The Start of Trouble

FOR reasons of his own, Sam Twigger decided to do the sign for the store next.

He approached David Doane the following morning. Doane eyed him and told him what sign he wanted painted across the width of the building over the door, and Twigger said he would get somebody to help him set up the scaffolding, and start to work immediately.

"I notice you're wearin' a gun," Doane said.

"Yup, I buckled it on," Sam Twigger replied. "It's a tough town. Folks are always fightin'. I ain't much good in a fist fight, so I've got to be ready to protect myself."

"If you'll notice, I've got a gun, too," David Doane pointed out. "If anybody's trailin' me, I'm ready for 'em."

Somebody called Doane, and he hurried away. Twigger started taking down the scaffolding at the blacksmith shop and packing it over to the store.

Bert Hanes came out of the smithy and helped a little.

"One of the Three Star riders was in this mornin', and he says the outfit will be in town tomorrow," Hanes reported. "I'll talk to the boss about the ranch signs. And there might be some trouble."

"About gettin' him to have the signs made?" Sam Twigger asked.

"Not that. But the Three Star boys look on Saffron Gulch as their town, and they don't like this gold-rushin' crowd."

"Can't blame 'em any."

"And there's another angle. I told you that this Jack Bamney runs Dave Doane's ranch for him. They've got no more'n half as many men as the Three Star, and Doane's men are all imported gunmen. There may be trouble between the two outfits. You keep your eyes open tomorrow, and stay where you won't get hurt. You think it's wise to pack that gun?"

"Yup, I think so," Sam Twigger said.

"Totin' a gun is an invitation to trouble," Hanes said. "It means you're ready to talk back if a man jumps you."

"You wasn't wearin' one yesterday, but trouble came just the same," Twigger reminded him, grinning.

"That's right. Can you shoot pretty good?"

"I manage to get along," Sam Twigger replied.

He finished moving the scaffold and, after the noon meal he started work on the sign. He had heard that Ed Boles had left town during the night and he wasn't afraid of anybody else at the moment.

He painted until sunset, then put away his ladder, and carried his brushes and paints to his tent. He built up his fire, cooked his supper, watered the horse, and gave him some oats.

"You'll be gettin' fat if you stay here, not workin' any," Sam Twigger told him. "When my work is done, you're goin' to live the rest of yore days on the fat of the land."

The horse put up his ears a moment, then went on eating oats. Twigger gave him water, and returned to his tent.

He sat before it, smoking, as the dusk turned to night and the bright moon came up over the hills. Ed Boles was gone, and he didn't figure that Doane was the kind of man to make a cowardly attack. Doane would wait to see if Sam Twigger made a move.

He hadn't indulged in target practice lately, because he didn't want to attract attention. But he stood in the dark space on the side of his tent, later, and practiced swift drawing of his six-gun.

TWIGGER was up at dawn and, after breakfast, went down to resume work on the sign. He was eager to do as much as he could before the sun got hot and slowed him down.

At midmorning his attention was attracted by shouting at the end of the street. He saw a dozen riders approaching at high speed. Other riders and those afoot in the street scattered out of their way. Laughing and shouting, the riders stopped their ponies in front of Saffron Gulch's old saloon, amid a cloud of dust, and slid out of their saddles. Sam Twigger saw the Three Star brand on the flanks of their horses.

A buckboard followed them, an elderly man driving it and a younger one sitting beside him. The elderly man was the boss of the Three Star, Twigger supposed, the one Bert Hanes was going to see about having signs made.

The Three Star riders barged into the saloon for their trail drinks, and soon [illegible] again and trooped across the [illegible] the store, laughing and shouting.

The gold-rushes gave them plenty of room. The Three Star riders were not looking for trouble, evidently, but they did not intend to be pushed around, either. They ignored the professional gamblers who tried to induce them to sit in games. If they did any poker playing, it would be strictly among themselves.

Sam Twigger watched them as he went on painting. The sign was nearing completion rapidly. Doane had ordered an extra good one, with shaded letters, and Sam Twigger bent to his work.

He heard another commotion at the other end of the street. Another bunch of riders had come to town. Twigger guessed they were from Doane's ranch. They looked tough and mean.

They rode down the street slowly, their surly glances taking in the crowds along the walks. In a bunch, they went to the lower end of the street and swaggered into one of the saloon tents.

He went down his ladder and around to the side of the store building to mix some paint. A few feet from where he was working, there was an open window. He heard David Doane's voice.

"Take it a mite easy, Jack," Doane was saying. "The Three Star is a big, prosperous outfit. You can't just gunfight all its riders out of the valley. Whittle 'em down a little at a time. I want the ranch, and I've got the money to buy it. But I make no mistakes."

"All right!" the voice of another man re-

plied. "We'll do some whittlin' down. I've got some whittlin' to do myself, on that Bert Hanes."

"He ran Ed Boles out of town, Bamney," Doane said in warning tones.

"I ain't Ed Boles," Jack Bamney replied.

They went away from the window, and Sam Twigger heard no more. He mixed his paint and carried it around to the front, and got up on the scaffold again.

As he worked, he saw David Doane and the other man come to the doorway below him. They stood there talking in low inaudible voices. Sam Twigger looked well at that other man.

He was tall, thin, bowlegged. He wore a gunbelt with the holster tied down and his hat on the back of his head. An uneven black mustache shaded his upper lip.

Sam Twigger looked down and felt red rage rising within him. It was almost time for him to do his work, he knew.

Up the street, a couple of the gold-rushers began a fist fight, and almost everybody rushed there to watch it.

DOANE went back into the store, and Jack Bamney went out upon the walk and saw two riders from Doane's ranch. They hurried to him.

"You round up the others, and bring 'em here to the store," Twigger heard him order. "I've got plans."

"All right, Bamney," one of the men replied.

"The boss wants us to pick separate fights with the Three Star outfit. About a dozen of 'em are in town. Now hustle."

The two cowpunchers hurried away. Jack Bamney remained standing on the walk in front of the store. Sam Twigger put his brush down, picked up a rag, and wiped the paint off his hands, rubbing them until they were not slippery.

He glanced along the street again. Saw Bert Hanes was coming along the walk with a pretty girl clinging to his arm. That was Betty Clawson, the girl Hanes intended to marry, Twigger supposed. She was wearing a pretty summery dress and a blue sunbonnet. She was young, dark-haired and pretty.

Jack Bamney saw them coming, too, and stepped back out of sight. As they came in front of the store, he stepped forth, removed his hat and made an elaborate bow.

"Betty Clawson!" Bamney said. "My, I'm glad to see yuh!"

Betty Clawson inclined her head slightly, and started past. But Jack Bamney barred their way.

"I'd like to buy yuh some candy, if yuh'll step into the store," he said.

"Miss Clawson doesn't care for any," Hanes said. "She doesn't even want to speak to you."

"Hanes, somethin' tells me that we're goin' to mix right soon, and mix bad!" Bamney said, thrusting his head forward, with his eyes blazing.

"Any time, Bamney, when I haven't a lady with me," Hanes told him.

"Please!" Betty Clawson begged. "No trouble."

Bamney bowed to her mockingly again. "I ain't the man to start bad trouble in the presence of a lady," he told her. "I'll wait till I see this Hanes hombre alone."

"I'll be back as soon as I take Miss Clawson home," Hanes promised.

Sam Twigger prepared to descend the ladder. But he stopped with his foot on the first rung of it and looked up the street.

A gun had barked near one of the liquor tents. Another answered it. Men began scattering. Down the street came a loud cry.

"Three Star men this way!"

CHAPTER VI

Books Balanced

A BULLET came singing down the street and smacked into the front of the store. Bert Hanes hurried Betty Clawson inside out of the way of possible injury. Up and down the street, men were running to get under cover, for more guns were thundering.

Wild shouts near the liquor tent showed where the fight had started. Three Star cowpunchers were hurrying in that direction, drawing their six-guns. Jack Bamney started running, clawing at his gun.

Sam Twigger saw all this from the scaffold. Three Star punchers had gathered near a tent, where a man was stretched on the ground and another was sitting up, holding his shoulder.

Bert Hanes came dashing out of the store. He looked up and saw Sam Twigger.

"You'd better get down from there," Hanes called. "You're a good target. This trouble may be serious."

"Oh, I'm comin' down," Twigger called in reply.

Hanes hurried up the street, keeping close to the fronts of the buildings. As Sam Twigger started down the ladder Doane appeared in the doorway below.

"The cussed fools!" he heard Doane say. "I told 'em not to start trouble today. They'll shore get the worst of it."

Doane was speaking to the storekeeper, his partner.

Up the street, there was more shooting. Puffs of smoke spurted as men of both outfits fired at one another.

One of the men from Doane's ranch had

shot down a Three Star rider in front of the liquor tent. That had started it.

"Hunt 'em down!" Twigger heard somebody shouting at the upper end of the street.

The thoroughfare was almost cleared now, except for horses. The gold-rushers had disappeared. They wanted no part of this trouble.

Sam Twigger reached the bottom of the ladder and went into the store. David Doane was standing just inside the door. He eyed Sam Twigger.

"Maybe you want to play a hand in this little game," Doane said. "Now would be a good time to shoot me, if you are the feller who's trailin' me. You could say I got hit by a stray bullet."

"Whenever I do any shootin', everybody'll know a stray bullet didn't have anything to do with it," Twigger said.

"I was intendin' to keep you here, to keep an eye on you," Doane said. "But I've changed my mind. Finish that sign, pack up and get out of Saffron Gulch. Them's orders."

"Are you runnin' this town?" Sam Twigger asked, his eyes narrowing.

"If you want a straight answer, I am," Doane told him. "You have until tomorrow mornin'. I ought to have you shot, anyway, for paintin' them signs about me along the trails."

Sam Twigger stepped out into the empty street. There were a few more shots, then the firing ceased. Up the wide roadway, two men were sprawled in the dirt, face downward, either dead or wounded. Men began cautiously to appear. Then they flooded into the street. Dead and wounded were picked up and carried out of sight. The battle was over for the time being. The tent saloons were quickly crowded again.

DOWN the street a crowd of men surged forth, to resume trading and their recreations, where they had left off when the fighting began. Sam Twigger saw Bert Hanes swinging along, coming back to take Betty Clawson home.

Hanes jumped up the steps to the platform in front of the store.

"One of Doane's men started it," he told Sam Twigger. "Our boys jumped in, of course. But the boss finally made them stop. They'd have exterminated the Doane bunch."

"Got a favor to ask you," Sam Twigger said. "I'd be obliged if you feel like grantin' it."

"Shore."

"Just stand by and see fair play, that's all I'm askin'. You heard about me paintin' them signs on rocks?"

"Yep. And that got Dave Doane plumb worried."

"A man killed my sister's husband, and I've been trailin' to balance the books."

"So that's it!"

"Yup. Left her with three small kids to raise. She loved her husband, too. I can see her cryin' yet. Killed him in cold blood."

"You've found the killer?"

"Yup, I've finally found him."

"I suppose it's Dave Doane you're meanin'."

"You're wrong," Sam Twigger said. "It was Doane's name I used in them signs. I thought he'd look me up and bring me to the man I wanted. 'Cause the man I want is always near Dave Doane. Has been for years. If I'd used that man's name, he'd have been put on guard, and mebbe I'd never have found him. I ain't got anything against Dave Doane."

"And what do you want me to do, Sam?"

"Just stand by, and see that I get a square deal."

"I'll stand by. You're intendin' to gunfight him?"

"That's right. I'll give him a even break, even if he ain't deservin' of it."

"You're runnin' a big risk," Hanes hinted. "Mebbe this man is good with a gun."

Sam Twigger shrugged his thin shoulders.

"I heard he was pretty good," he said simply.

"Who is he?" Hanes asked. "What's his name?"

"Here he comes, now," Twigger said, pointing a gnarled skinny finger.

As he spoke, he went down to the walk and stood waiting.

Jack Bamney was hurrying along the street, on his way to report to David Doane. Hanes understood, and walked along the front of the store building so Bamney would not be disconcerted by meeting him.

Bamney swaggered up, with his head down. He reached the store and prepared to go up the step.

"Jack Bamney!" Sam Twigger barked.

Bamney stopped, turned.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" he asked.

"I'm Sam Twigger, the sign painter. Want to see you about somethin'."

"Make it short. I've got business."

"Oh, I'll make it short, Bamney! And maybe you won't have to 'tend to that business. 'Bout a year ago, over Texas way, you shot and killed a man 'cause he caught you cheatin' in a card game and told you so."

BAMNEY'S eyes opened wide, and he took his foot off the step.

"Well, what of it?" he asked.

"The man you killed was my sister's husband. I've been lookin' for you ever since. Knew that if I could locate Doane, I'd find you somewhere near. Well—you're wearin' a gun, Bamney. Afraid to use it?"

"Why, you old coot!" Jack Bamney cried.

His hand made a dive for his holster. Sam Twigger's hand moved swiftly also.

It seemed to Bert Hanes and the others

who were watching that the two guns roared in unison. But Bamney's cracked only once, and Sam Twiggers' roared three times as fast as the hammer could be worked.

Sam Twigger's hat flew from his head—it was that close. Jack Bamney dropped his gun, reeled and sprawled on his side.

Men came running, but Bert Hanes sprang down on the walk, holding his own gun ready to protect Sam Twigger.

"Easy, gents!" he shouted. "This was a personal matter. Got nothin' to do with the other fight."

Men rushed from the store, David Doane among them. He saw Bamney sprawled lifeless on the walk. Sam Twigger moved slowly forward, still holding his gun ready. He reached down and turned Bamney over on his back and made a swift inspection.

"Just like I figgered," he muttered. "One in the head, one in his black heart, and the third in his middle. I reckon I can go home, now."

"What's goin' on here?" David Doane roared.

"Easy!" Hanes warned him. "It's got nothin' to do with you. Sam Twigger just balanced the books. I'll do some explainin' to you later, Doane."

BETTY CLAWSON dashed out of the store, and clung to Hanes' arm. Seeing him with his six-gun in hand, she thought at first he had been in the fight. She knew how he hated Jack Bamney.

"You come with us, Sam," Hanes ordered, as he patted Betty's hand reassuringly. "We're goin' to the Clawson cottage. Betty's made an apple pie, and I can recommend it."

Sam Twigger straightened up and then smiled at Betty. He holstered the gun and moved over beside her.

The three of them crossed the street and walked slowly in the direction of the Clawson cottage.

"I ain't had a piece of apple pie for I don't know how long," Sam Twigger said.

A Queen of Bronc Busters becomes the storm center of murderous combat on the Box B cattle spread in RENEGADE RANGE, a novelet by ED EARL REPP, packed with action and drama—coming next issue!

Buffalo Billy's gun roared as the breed drew a knife

BILLY DRAWS A LONG BOW

By SCOTT CARLETON

Yeoman ancestors come in handy when Buffalo Billy Bates and an Englishman face torture and death in a Cheyenne camp!

THE appointment was for October 15th and Buffalo Billy Bates got to Fort Sheridan, at Wounded Knee crossing, by noon. Bill Cody had suggested the meeting in an offhand way to his protege.

"How'd you like a little job of guiding, Billy boy?" he inquired.

"Guiding who?" Billy wanted to know, ungrammatically.

Cody evaded the question.

"It'll be fun," he said, smiling and fingering his long, fair mustache. "So meet me at Sheridan, Billy boy, on the fifteenth of October, if the Sioux don't lift your hair."

"Shucks, they wouldn't look at mine if yours was around," Billy Bates retorted, eyeing Buffalo Bill's flowing blond locks.

So here he was, riding leisurely into Fort Sheridan at noon on the 15th, to keep an appointment made seven months before. That was the way of the plains.

Fort Sheridan was growing. 'Dobe and log houses straggled outside the old stockade, showing an increasing confidence in the end of Indian troubles. There was a general store and trading post. And it was on the porch of the store that Buffalo Billy Bates beheld a strange and wonderful object.

It was a man, undoubtedly. But unlike any

man this lean, buckskin clad scout had ever seen in all his twenty-one years. The man wore a tight fitting coat of black and white checks which shimmered in the bright sunshine and made Billy blink. He had on tight-fitting riding breeches and shining knee-high boots. But this was not the worst. Under a soft felt hat, small by plainsman's standards, gleamed a single rimless glass stuck in one eye. Without visible support, it remained in place as though it, the weird owner calmly scrutinized Fort Sheridan.

Automatically Billy Bates checked his horse. As he did so, a pair of Indians came around the corner of the store. Leading was the buck, a half-breed dressed in a dirty Hudson Bay parka, once red, now nearly the color of the soil. And following him, as was the custom, came his squaw, with a huge parcel of trade goods balanced on her head.

SHE was old and scrawny and bent nearly double beneath the weight of the bundle. Her lord and master strode unconcernedly ahead of her, while she tottered after him, staggering a little under the load.

The strange creature turned his glittering eyeglass on this quite ordinary tableau. Apparently, however, it was not ordinary to him. "I say!" he remarked in a queer, clipped accent. And forthwith he strode off the porch and up to the squaw. "This blasted bundle is much too heavy for you—er—madame. Allow me." He laid hands upon it.

The squaw pulled away with a throaty gurgle of alarm.

"Look here—" the man in the checkered coat started to protest, but just then the half breed turned and came back.

He snarled something in Cheyenne and with the flat of his hand gave the intruder a sharp buffet that sent him staggering back. Even then there was only bewilderment on the stranger's good-humored face. But the breed followed up by giving the squaw a kick which nearly sent her headlong.

At that the stranger's face darkened in sudden anger. He stepped in, swung the breed around with his left hand while his right curved up in a dazzling arc. There was a sharp crack and to Billy Bates' delight, the breed hurtled backward. He lost his rifle as he sprawled flat on his shoulder-blades in the dust of the road.

Bates expected the stranger to jump on the prostrate enemy. But to his puzzlement, the man merely stood looking down at the breed, dusting off his hands.

"There, you beggar," he said. "Perhaps that'll teach you some manners."

Words of warning died in Buffalo Billy's throat. He saw the breed's hand flash to the sheath knife in his belt. There was no time for him even to dismount before the knife was in the air. His Dragoon pistol leaped from its holster and roared. There was a ringing clash as lead met steel and the knife took wings as though it had suddenly come alive.

The breed, still dazed, rolled like a cat to his hands and knees and scuttled for his rifle. Billy slid from his saddle and his booted foot drove the breed flat into the dust again. The next moment his pistol muzzle made a cold ring behind the fallen man's ear.

"Do not force the lightning, Red Jacket," he said in Cheyenne, softly. "Take your weapons and go in peace."

The half breed clawed himself to his feet. His face was black with rage and mortification. His eyes darted from Bates to the stranger.

"You have laid hands on Red Jacket," he said with cold, repressed fury. There was more than Indian savagery in his eyes. There was also the viciousness of the white man. "You have kicked him, like a woman. Red Jacket does not forget."

He strode away with his blanket, like his shattered dignity, wrapped closely about him.

"I say, what a pair of eyes," the stranger said. "Gives me a chill. Thanks old man, you came along just in time." He put out his hand. "I'm Howard Reston, of England."

Bates shook hands soberly. "Reckoned as much," he said. "I'm Buffalo Billy Bates. You shouldn't ought to mix in things you don't understand, Mr. Reston. Amongst Injuns, the squaw carries the load and yore mixin' in wasn't welcomed, even by her."

"Dashed blunder, what?" Reston said, removing the single glass from his eye and blinking. "Stepped right on the bally Red Indian etiquette, didn't I?"

"You did," Bates assured him. "And you've made an enemy."

"So have you. I didn't get what the beggar was saying, but I'll wager he meant no good to either one of us."

Bates shrugged.

"Enemies are no new thing to me," he said casually. "But Red Jacket is bad medicine. He isn't liked, stranger."

A HAIL interrupted him. Buffalo Bill Cody was striding toward them, his fair hair blowing behind him, a smile of welcome splitting his face.

"Billy boy!" he shouted. "Right on time. And I see you've already met yore man!"

"My man?" Bates said dazedly as his hand was crushed and wrung by the famous scout who had been like a father to him.

"Billy boy, this is the job I was telling you about. Mr. Reston is over from England for a spot of buffalo hunting, as he would say, and you're the boy to guide him. It's safe enough now that the Sioux have hung up the war hatchet."

Bates gaped from Cody to the outlandishly

dressed Reston, who was beaming upon him.

"He's goin' huntin'—in them duds?" he stuttered.

"Something wrong with them?" Reston asked, gazing down at himself. Then his eyes lit up boyishly. "I say, I'd like nothing better that a suit of buckskins like yours, old man. Do you think it would be possible to find me an outfit like yours?"

Bates did not bother to answer that.

"One more question," he asked weakly. "What is that glass in your eye?"

The explanation took the rest of the day. . . .

By Friday morning, Billy Bates and Howard Reston, with a canvas topped wagon carrying their supplies, were well out on the plains. Reston was decently garbed in new, smoke-smelling buckskins, his checkered riding garments packed away in the huge trunk inside the wagon.

Although a little trying, his outspoken appreciation of the country was flattering to Bates. He exclaimed in delight over everything—the clear, winy air, strong as champagne, the vast distances, the tremendous billows of earth which rolled to the horizon like a frozen sea, the herds of bounding antelope and the hopping jackrabbits, the mirages which sometimes marched alongside them.

"An amazing country," he said, over and over again.

Sometimes he watched Bates. His eyes traveled over the heavy Dragoon revolvers snugged in their holsters, the saddle carbine and the chokeberry bow and quiver of arrows slung over the scout's shoulders.

"You believe in being well-prepared, don't you?" he murmured. "Speaking of archery, do you know I had an ancestor at Crécy?"

"That so?" Billy Bates murmured politely. "Did he live there long?"

Reston stared at him in astonishment. Then his brow cleared and he snickered politely.

"Oh, I see," he said. "Very witty. But seriously, the battle of Crécy was a bit of a war, don't you know. The English archers decimated the French knights and that was the end of chivalry. Rather a pity, though it made the English yeoman the most deadly fighter in the world. I say, Bates, aren't you listening?"

Billy Bates was off his horse—he had been riding alongside the wagon—and crouched down in the grass. A buffalo wallow here had been left partly full of water by the rain and in the semi-soft mud was the slurred outline of a single moccasin print.

Reston peered over his shoulder.

"What is it, a footprint?"

Billy raised his head and stared off at the shimmering horizon.

"Bill Cody sometimes said, 'if it's just one print it ain't a trail, it's an accident'," he quoted. "But same don't hold true of Injuns."

"Red Indians!" Reston looked pleased and fingered his Sharps expectantly.

"Don't go gettin' ideas," Bates said. "We're not a war party. And the Injuns are supposed to be plumb peaceful. All the same," he squinted at the sun. "We're going to make camp now in those cottonwoods over by the creek, whilst I scout around."

The wagon was drawn into the cover of the trees and hidden.

"Stay here with the wagon—don't ride off," Bates ordered. "Stay under cover, don't move till I get back."

THE Englishman promised and the scout rode off to look for sign. He made a wide circle of many miles. But apart from buffalo and antelope trails, he saw no sign of Indian or other human sign. It was about ten o'clock and long dark, when he cut back cautiously to the camp.

His heart leaped into his mouth as he topped the last swell and came within sight of the dark shadow of the trees. There was a tiny red flickering light in there, low down to the ground.

Billy Bates smothered a curse as he flung caution to the winds and kicked his heels into his horse's sides. Reston had, with sublime ignorance, lighted a fire!

Even as his pony thundered down upon the cottonwoods, a sound burst upon Billy's ear that told him he was too late. It was the appallingly, chilling sound of the war whoops!

It was followed by the heavy crash of the Sharps. Bates yanked his pistols. He saw dim shadowy shapes of men and horses and he fired both guns as fast as he could. The white canvas of the wagon glimmered faintly before him and now he saw in the feeble flicker of firelight, a knot of struggling men on the ground beneath the wheels.

Bates flung himself from his horse. And then Indians rose up all about him. Strong sinewy hands clutched at him. He swung his heavy guns ruthlessly, felt the shock as they landed and heard the grunts of pain. Then something crashed on his head and his beaver hat dented beneath the blow. The firelight blew up in a wild red blast of flame and consciousness left him. . . .

Pain stabbed at Buffalo Billy Bates' eyes. He opened them, felt the sun beat at his eyeballs like a knife and closed them. To his ears came the sound of Indian voices and the myriad sounds, further away, of an Indian camp. He heard the bark of dogs, the shrill voices of the squaws and the wailing of a fretful papoose. After awhile he opened his eyes cautiously, letting them gradually get used to the sun.

He was lying on his back, tied hand and foot, in a crude circle of skin teepees. Reston was similarly tied near him. The Englishman's eyes were open, fixed on Bates' face. There was a ragged cut on his cheek from

which blood had spread down his face and neck and dried in a brown mask. Relief flared in his eyes now.

"Bates!" he said. "Thank heaven. I thought you had been scuppered." He swallowed painfully.

"I've got a hard head, Mister Reston," Buffalo Billy said hiding his pain.

The leggings of Indians approached and both men were hauled to their feet. Bates found himself confronted by the breed Red Jacket and half a dozen Dog Soldiers of the Cheyenne nation. Bates' heart sank. The Dog Soldiers were the shock troops, the hardest fighters, the strongest and most enduring young warriors of the tribe. And they bore the strongest hatred for the white man, were its most implacable enemies, the hardest to appease.

Red Jacket gloated openly over his prisoners.

"The Great Spirit has smiled upon me," he breathed. "He has delivered the Long Hair and the Shining Eye into my hands for blood vengeance. Look!" He flung out a dramatic arm.

Reston looked with uncomprehending eyes. But to Bates the scene had sharp, stark meaning. The women were lining up in a double line facing each other. They were arming themselves with clubs and whips and weapons of every description.

"The gauntlet!" Bates whispered. He knew too well what that meant. Long before a prisoner, however fleet, could run that double line he would be beaten into a bloody, senseless pulp. He craned his neck. Over the heads of the crowding Dog Soldiers he saw a familiar face, Dull Knife, an old chief. Bates raised his voice.

"Dull Knife!" he called. "Is this the way the Cheyennes smoke the pipe of peace with the white man? Do the Cheyennes talk peace with the forked tongue and make war behind the backs of the white soldiers?"

DULL KNIFE strode forward, the Dog Soldiers making way respectfully for him. The face of the old chief was troubled.

"Our people are at peace," he admitted. "But Red Jacket has told us of a blood insult, of blows and kicks as though he were a woman. A blood insult must be avenged, Long Hair."

"By the gauntlet?" Bates snarled. "If Red Jacket must avenge his honor let him fight me man to man, not with the clubs and whips of your squaws!"

Dull Knife nodded.

"It is true," he said. "Long Hair is a mighty warrior. He deserves a warrior's death."

There was a sudden interruption. The squaws were cackling and screaming with delight. All heads turned.

They had dragged Reston's trunk from the wagon and broken it open with tomahawks. Now squaws and children were parading loftily around in Reston's amazing wardrobe. An old warrior had donned his black and white checked coat. Another had an amazing garment of flaming red flannel over his buckskins. There were a variety of hats from a shining stovepipe to a hard round derby. It was a sight which at any other time would have been screamingly funny, but which brought no amusement to either one of the prisoners.

Two squaws were busily dragging out a long leather case from the wagon. They ripped it open. A shining long stick of wood came forth and there were little murmurs of astonishment from the Indians.

It was a bow. But a bow the likes of which no Indian had ever seen. It was six feet long, dwarfing their four-foot weapons. It was made of a rich warm brown wood for two-thirds of its thickness and a pale yellow wood on its flat back. It was richly varnished and shone like silk in the bright sunlight. It had a wrapped leather handle and its ends were crowned with beautifully carved horn tips, grooved for the waxed Flemish string.

Red Jacket grunted and his eyes lit up avariciously. He pushed his way through the crowd, scattering squaws and seized the shining bow. There were arrows in the case too, arrows as sleek and shining as the weapon they fitted. They were ringed with bright colors and tipped with razor sharp steel barbs. And they were long—longer than any Indian arrow.

Bates was as surprised as the Indians.

"Where'd that come from?" he asked Reston. "You never said anything about having a bow."

"That's an English long bow," Reston said. "Made of yew. I—"

A shout of laughter drowned him out. Red Jacket was trying to string the giant bow and in spite of the power of his sinewy arms, was unable to bend it enough to slip the waxed loop into the bone nock. The Cheyennes were laughing at Red Jacket unmercifully.

The half-breed's face began to darken again with anger. He whirled, strode back to the prisoners and hurled the bow at Reston's feet.

"This must belong to the Up-Above People," he shouted. "Let me see the paleface with the Shining Eye bend this bow!"

There was a hush while Bates translated. A queer little smile came on Reston's face.

"Tell them to cut me loose," he said.

At Dull Knife's gesture, a Dog Soldier stepped forward and sliced through the bonds at Reston's wrists and ankles. The Englishman flexed his muscles leisurely. Then he picked up the bow. There was an ease and sureness about his movements which rang a bell in Bates' brain. This man knew what he was doing.

Reston placed the lower end of the bow at the arch of his left foot, his left hand at its middle, his right hand at its top. So deftly

that they could not see how it was done, he applied pressure, pushing with his right hand, pulling with his left. The bow bent and the loop of the string slipped into the groove. The bow was strung.

"*Ai-ee!*" The Indians drew in their breath.

An idea was born in that instant in Buffalo Billy Bates' mind.

"Reston," he said softly. "Red Jacket claims a blood vengeance for the insult of kickin' him back in Fort Sheridan. That means one of us has got to fight him. Shall I take him with a knife?"

RESTON'S answer was immediate.

"Tell him I'll fight him with bow and arrows!"

Bates translated. He saw hatred flash in Red Jacket's eyes, but no fear. Dull Knife raised his hand.

"The pale face speaks fairly. Red Jacket, you are a great warrior. You will each be taken out on the prairie with your bows to stalk the other. May Manitou smile on your blood vengeance."

Half an hour later, the entire village was grouped in a long straggling line, watching two small figures trudging away from them on the prairie. Reston carried his shining long bow and a quiver of arrows. Red Jacket carried his short hickory war bow with his own iron-tipped and feather-tufted war arrows. His face was grim and murderous. Reston had a queerly confident smile on his face that disturbed Bates.

As they were walking out of the village together, Reston spoke quietly to the scout.

"Know why he couldn't bend this bow, old man?" he asked. "It has a pull of seventy-five pounds. These Indian bows must pull about twenty-five."

Bates was astonished.

"Are you that strong, Reston?"

"Doesn't take strength," the Englishman said. "Notice how they draw their arrows, with the thumb hooked in the string? Twenty-five pounds is all I could pull that way. But with three fingers hooked in the string like this, I can manage at least eighty."

"I reckon you can shoot further," Bates agreed. "But remember, Reston, he's an Injun! He'll *stalk* you!"

Reston nodded, though Bates had the uncomfortable feeling he didn't understand. But there was no time for further talk. The stage was set. Bates had to stand by helplessly, guarded by Dog Soldiers, and watch his friend walk out to what was probably his death.

Half a mile apart, the two fighters stopped. Reston's bow flashed in the sun as he turned and Bates groaned. The shining varnish was a brilliant mark for Red Jacket, no matter how Reston might hide.

Dull Knife held aloft his lance tipped with turkey feathers. Then he brought it down in a sweep. At once Red Jacket melted into the brush and disappeared.

Bates could almost see Reston blink in astonishment. He was wondering why Red Jacket didn't stand up and fight. Carefully he drew an arrow from his quiver, nocked it and started to pace forward.

Straining his eyes, Bates could see Red Jacket. The breed was sliding forward through the scattered brush and grass like a snake, taking advantage of every bit of cover and circling to flank his foe.

Reston walked forward steadily. Bates wanted to shout, to warn him, but a single look at the faces of the Cheyennes around him stifled that impulse. He found his palms damp with sweat and closed his fingers tightly.

The combatants were less than three hundred yards apart when Reston caught his first glimpse of Red Jacket. Instantly he stopped and his bow swung up to shooting position. A murmur of astonishment came from the Indians and Bates, though silent, was just as surprised.

For his own chokecherry bow, like the Indian's weapons, was scarcely effective over fifty yards. The Indian, as a hunter, depended upon his woodcraft to get him so close that he couldn't miss. He never tried long distance shots because his bow wouldn't carry that far. And here was this crazy Englishman preparing to shoot at three hundred yards!

The arrow left Reston's bow. It gleamed in the sunlight, flashing forward so swiftly that the eye could just follow it. And to the awe and fright of that assembled band of Indians, it flashed through the air those full three hundred yards and they saw Red Jacket duck wildly as it hissed by him and struck quivering into the ground!

A shout went up from the Cheyennes—a shout of superstitious fear. What manner of bow was this, what manner of man could shoot it?

But Red Jacket was made of sterner stuff. Having had his lesson, he melted into the sage again and vanished from sight. Reston was left standing there rather foolishly and looking out upon an apparently empty plain.

WITH all the consummate skill and craft of the Indian, Red Jacket stalked his prey. He was handicapped, too. He had to get within thirty or forty yards to make his shot certain. At any distance greater than that, the English bowman's deadly accuracy would mean swift doom for him. Could he creep that close on the open prairie?

He put on the most magnificant stalk of his life. He was like a cat, like an empty rug in the way he flattened himself to earth. He managed to disappear in three inches of grass. He flowed forward without moving a blade of grass to betray his movements.

Sometimes he was visible to the watchers

near the village and not to Reston. Bates felt his heart pounding with excitement and his palms growing wetter. Red Jacket had completed his flanking movement and was coming in from the side, while Reston was still staring ahead where he thought Red Jacket should be.

Seeing the Englishman facing the other way, Red Jacket moved faster. The watchers at the village could see him more plainly now, sliding forward, bow held before him. He was within a hundred yards when Reston, growing uneasy, began to turn. Red Jacket flattened out on the ground and melted out of sight.

Reston, plainly worried, turned in a complete circle. Then the idea of cover occurred belatedly to him, and he dropped to one knee behind a bush. But the sun shone blindingly on the bright varnish of his bow and it was a shining mark.

Red Jacket slid in, closing the distance. The hundred yards shrank to seventy, to fifty. Then Red Jacket, smarting under the humiliation of being outshot, tried to show how far he could shoot. At fifty yards, he came cautiously to one knee and pulled back his bowstring.

The arrow hissed over the bush where Reston was crouched. The bright spot that was the sun's reflection on the bow jerked nervously. Then Reston stood up in plain sight.

A great shout went up from the Indians. Red Jacket, carried away by the excitement sprang up too. Both warriors had nocked an arrow simultaneously. And both drew back their bowstrings at once.

The Indian arrow darted forward, wavered and plunked into the ground, short. Reston's arrow flashed like an avenging blade. It darted at and through, Red Jacket's solid form. It flew on, no longer bright, but dully red for twenty yards more before it struck and quivered in the earth. Red Jacket stood upright for a long second before he wavered and crumpled downward.

There was stunned silence amongst the Cheyennes. Then an old medicine man gave a sharp cry.

"This is evil magic! Kill the placeface, kill him."

"Stop!" Buffalo Billy Bates whirled, arms flung high. "Dull Knife! The blood vengeance is ended! You have given your word!"

Dull Knife raised his lance, checking the sudden eager surge of the Dog Soldiers.

"Long Hair speaks with the single tongue. He goes free and the Shining Eye with him. I have spoken."

Far out on the prairie, Buffalo Billy Bates edged his horse close to the wagon. Reston was driving placidly, his eyes far away on the horizon.

"Say, Howard," Bates began.

"Yes?"

"I want to take back a lot of things I been thinking about you. And I reckon I owe you an apology, too."

"You were right, old man," Reston said crisply. "Lighting that fire was the silliest thing a man could do. Billy, will you teach me something about these Red Indians?"

"It's a proposition," Bates grinned. "If you'll tell me about that battle of Cre—Crécy. And let me try a shot on that bow. Though for *real* long work," he added thoughtfully, "I reckon I'll stick to my Sharps."

FURTHER EXCITING ADVENTURES OF BUFFALO BILLY BATES, INDIAN SCOUT, IN

A SCALP FOR CUSTER

An Exciting Story of the Frontier

By SCOTT CARLETON

COMING NEXT ISSUE

RUN, SHEEP, RUN

By SAMUEL MINES

Government Agent Martin Jackson risks death in pursuit of his duty when the clouds of a grim range war gather!

CHAPTER I

No Grass for Sheep

MARTIN JACKSON, the Government man, heard the heavy reports of gunfire slamming its echoes back and forth among the timbered hills and more faintly, the terrified blatting of sheep. He swung his big horse off the road and sent it crashing through a grove of young mountain birches and up the side of the steep ridge between himself and the sounds.

The dread noises came louder as his horse topped the ridge and sure-footed his way amongst the boulders and bushes while Jackson sought for a way down the other side.

He was a tall man and thin, with his long legs sticking straight down so that he needed a big horse to clear himself of the ground. He had a long melancholy face but there were little crinkles about the corners of his severe mouth which hinted that he might smile easier than suspected. His clothes were the clothes of any range rider—faded blue shirt, levis, leather chaps and a wooden handled six-gun hugging his thigh.

He was, in fact, range born and bred. The Department of Interior was wise enough to select a mountain man to put in charge of Government lands and grazing leases.

Horse and rider found a way down, plunged headlong through briars and a grove of young aspens and burst out into a tilted mountain meadow, bright with sun and grass.

The meadow was a blur of motion and sound. Sheep bounded frantically across the grass. At the distant end shots still blasted the air. And dotting the entire length of the meadow, dead sheep huddled like woolly gray boulders above the grass.

There was a flicker of motion in the trees at the far end. Jackson saw the whisk of a horse's tail. A shot blasted and he heard the shrill ugly sound of a bullet as it ripped through the air not far from his head. He drew his own gun but there was no time to fire. His enemy was gone.

Jackson wasted no time in pursuit. Nor did he worry about exposing himself. The sheep killers would not linger to snipe at him, they were dangerous only if he tried to follow, when he would surely run into an ambush.

HE CHECKED his horse and stood quietly looking down at the desolation in the meadow, counting the dead sheep. Forty of the animals were sprawled in the grass, blood staining the thick gray tangle of their wool. A few still struggled painfully on the ground. The unwounded ones milled about in leaderless confusion.

Presently Jackson found the herder, a Mexican boy. He had been shot, apparently, as he sat unsuspecting in the grass. A double-barreled shotgun lay nearby and one thin arm was stretched out towards it as though he had reached vainly for the weapon even as the bullets cut him down.

A hail broke into Jackson's absorption. He twisted in his saddle. Two riders had broken into the meadow, were jogging towards him. As they came closer, Jackson recognized them. They were Abe Weeks, cattleman, owner of the Flying W and his *segundo*, Sam Cantrell.

They rode up to Jackson and stopped. Weeks looked around him with open satisfaction in his eyes.

"Well," he said. "We heard shootin' but we didn't reckon somebody was obligin' enough to do this little job for us. Thanks, Jackson."

"Don't try to be funny," Jackson said. "Whoever did this, shot that kid down in cold blood. Took a shot at me too just before they pulled stakes and quit the flat." His eyes ranged over the two men with no pretense at friendliness. "If I were a lawman, Weeks, I'd be asking you two for a sniff at the barrels of your guns."

"But you ain't a lawman," Weeks snapped.

He was a short man with a thin hungry face and lips pursed continuously as though

Jackson and Irene saw several cowboys wrestling with a sheepman on the ground

he were about to whistle. His shadow, Cantrell was a silent individual with a reputation as a gunman. He rarely talked.

Jackson turned from them and surveyed the meadow again.

"This is the kind of thing that's got to stop before the grazing leases are renewed," he said.

"I don't savvy you," Weeks blurted. "Are you for the sheepmen or for us?"

"The Government isn't for anybody," Jackson said. "There's a place for cattle and a place for sheep. You men have got to share this range."

"Share?" Weeks snapped. "Yuh can't share with sheep! They spoil the grass and foul the water! Cattle won't drink where sheep has been. And there's no grass where sheep has grazed. The blasted, stinkin' woolies even eat the roots!"

"Because you've crowded them onto a tenth of the range they need. Give them room enough and they won't ruin the grass any more'n cattle."

"We've leased this land for years. What do yuh want us to do, give it up?"

"You've leased five thousand acres and grazed your cattle over twenty thousand," Jackson reminded him. "The Government didn't kick. But when you try to keep men out of land which ain't yours, which you don't even lease—you're getting too big for your britches, Weeks."

The cattleman turned away from him.

"You're a fool—or worse, a sheepman!" he raged. "Come on, Sam, there's no profit in talkin' to that lame-brain."

They spurred their horses out of the meadow. After a last glance around, Jackson set his horse in motion too. He was headed for Chris Sullivan's Triple S ranch. From there he could send a message to town for the sheriff.

Weeks and Cantrell were bound for the same place, but he let them ride ahead of him, not anxious for their company. When he rode into the ranch yard of the Triple S, they had already arrived and there was a multitude of horses at the hitching rack and a crowd of cattlemen on the big verandah.

Old Chris Sullivan, the cattle king of this high Colorado country was there with his two sons, Robbie and Bert. The old man looked glum and tugged uneasily at his white mustache.

"I called this meetin' like you asked, Jackson," he rumbled. "But I'm hobbled if I can see any sense to it."

"You can't go on fighting," Jackson said. "Sheep being killed, cattle being killed, men being killed—the Government says its got to stop."

Bert, the elder Sullivan boy, a square-jawed replica of his father at nineteen, caught Jackson's elbow.

"I hear yuh've talked Will Potter into going round to the sheep camps and gettin' the Clayburnes and the others into comin' over here for a palaver," he said accusingly.

THE Government man returned the stare, level-eyed.

"Will is a level-headed lad," Jackson said. "I reckon he's about the only cattleman who understands this situation and wants to settle it. Yes, he's helping me. Anything wrong with that?"

"You're shouting right there is," Bert Sullivan said. "Will Potter's the best friend I've got. It's bad enough my own brother Robbie is weak in the head over Clayburne's gal. I ain't goin' to stand by and see you turn Will against us!"

"Shut up, Bert!" Robbie said heatedly.

He was a year younger than Bert Sullivan, an earnest, black-haired youth with a good looking face and a sensitive mouth.

"Nobody's goin' to shut me up," Bert Sullivan said belligerently.

Jackson dropped his hands helplessly.

"I don't know," he said. "All I can say is that this fighting had better stop or you folks'll find yourselves headed for a range war and the governor'll send soldiers in. And I won't renew your leases."

"You'll renew them," Abe Weeks said from the fringes of the circle. "Washington is a long way off, but I reckon Senator Barton can still be reached by telegraph. He's a cattleman, Jackson, and he swings a big club in Washington. You'll renew the leases or you'll be herdin' sheep at forty a month."

"Now that," said Jackson softly, "sounded like a threat, Abe, and if there's one thing I don't like its threats."

He moved so fast that Weeks had barely time to drop a hand to his gun butt. Jackson's left hand clamped over gun and fingers, locking them so that Weeks couldn't draw. Jackson's right fist bounced off Weeks' chin. The little man staggered back and sat down on the porch floor with a thump. Dazed, but furious, he yanked his gun.

Jackson's long leg swept out and up. His boot toe caught Weeks' wrist and sent the gun flying. At the same moment, he yanked his own six-gun and leveled it on Cantrell's middle. The *segundo* froze, his gun half out.

Jackson kept his eyes on Cantrell, but he spoke to the ring of cattlemen.

"Is there anyone else here who thinks I can be bluffed—or scared—into taking orders?"

"Put yore gun up, Jackson," old Sullivan rumbled. "Nobody's tryin' to crowd you. Weeks is a hothead, he spoke out of turn. We all came here when you asked, didn't we?"

"There's one thing we better get straight!" Jackson said, holstering his gun. He was angry. His straight brows were drawn down and made two furrows between them over his

nose. "You men have been using free land for so many years that you think it's yours. It's not. Sheep—or nesters—have as much legal right here as you have and the Government is not going to see you killing sheep and driving men off land that's public domain!"

His voice carried out over the group of men who watched him stolidly. There was nothing in their eyes but naked hostility. In truth, they had used this land so long they truly believed it was theirs. And in the Government man they saw only one who was leagued with the sheepmen to take it from them.

Jackson turned away and went to the edge of the porch. He heard Weeks climb to his feet behind him but paid no attention. His eyes lifted to the trail which climbed the nearby hills. The sheepmen should be coming, if Will Potter had done his job.

A rider came over the skyline. None followed. As he rode closer they saw he was a cowboy and he carried something over his saddle bows. He rode into the yard and slid a man's limp figure into waiting arms.

"Who is it?" Chris Sullivan called.

"Will Potter," said the rider. "I found him up near Clayburne's meadow. He's been shot with a .30-30. And there was forty dead sheep layin' around him."

CHAPTER II

Bushwacker Lead

JUMBLED impressions fought for ascendency in Mart Jackson's mind. He was thinking—Will Potter, the killer of those Clayburne sheep! Impossible! He hadn't seen the man who had thrown that hasty shot at him as he'd vanished in the trees, but it wasn't Will Potter. The youngster had been one of the few men on Wapiti Range who understood, as Jackson did, the danger of this suicide feud between cattle and sheep. He'd wanted to help Jackson stop it.

It was unthinkable that he had slaughtered the woolies on the mountain—equally unthinkable that Clayburne or one of his herders would have gulched him.

Yet on the porch behind him he heard the outraged oaths of the cattlemen, heard Abe Weeks' voice raised shrilly. Then abruptly there was silence. He turned.

Bert Sullivan was coming out of the house, saddle carbine in his hand. He headed for the steps. Jackson stepped in front of him.

"Where you goin', Bert?"

The youngster put out his hand.

"Stand aside, Jackson. Will Potter was my best friend."

"He was a friend of mine too," Jackson said. "Where you going?"

"To get Clayburne!"

"Bert!" Robbie Sullivan flung himself in front of his brother. "You can't kill Irene's father. There's been some mistake! Bert, listen to me!"

Bert Sullivan hit him—a solid right-hand smash. Robbie went off the steps backward and slammed into the dust with a bone-jarring smash.

"Don't try to stop me, Jackson," Bert Sullivan said, swinging his rifle barrel up slightly.

He went down the steps and out to his horse.

Jackson helped Robbie to his feet.

"Let him go, son," he said. "Nobody can stop him right now."

The cattlemen came down off the porch and split up, heading for their horses. Chris Sullivan stood there alone, tugging morosely at his white mustache. He looked down at Jackson and Robbie, standing alone.

"Reckon that's the end of your peace move," he said glumly. "We'll be swapping lead, not words."

Jackson found nothing to say. He got his horse, swung into saddle and turned towards town. He'd failed and it would be open war between cattlemen and sheepmen and no man could say where it would end.

The sheriff of Elkhorn county was Two-ton Bromley, a man so fat that his horses had to be carefully picked for size and strength, but a good officer and a dead shot. He listened gloomily to Jackson's crisp summary of the situation.

"This is cattle country, Mart," he said. "Always has been. Cattlemen came in here, fought Injuns and blizzards and drought and grizzlies and made the country what it is. Can't say I blame them for not wanting to hand it over to the woolies."

"They don't have to hand it over," Jackson said impatiently. "Great balls of fire! Can't I make anyone understand that there's room for both if they only use their heads and establish a deadline? The cattlemen want all or nothing! Anyway, Two-ton, you better round up some deputies and get out there and see if you can stop this range war before it busts around our ears."

When Bromley had gone, Jackson stabled his horse and went down the street to the tiny restaurant for his supper. He was dawdling over steak and potatoes when the door slapped open and a girl came in. She threw a quick glance around and headed for Jackson's table.

Irene Clayburne was slim and pretty, with brown hair brushed back neatly from her small ears and clear gray eyes. She wore a man's shirt and bibbed overalls with serviceable flat heeled shoes on her feet, yet in spite of this sheepman's garb she managed to look pretty.

She came up to Jackson's table as the Gov-

ernment man struggled to his feet.

"Mart, I've been looking for you."

He had a moment's dread.

"Something wrong, Irene?"

"Why no." She gave him a puzzled glance. "I just wanted to tell you I've been working on Dad and the others and I've got them to the point where they're willing to talk to the cowmen. What a job that was!" She flopped into a chair.

"Didn't—didn't Will Potter come to see you?" Jackson asked.

"No. Was he supposed to?"

"I sent him. He was drygulched before he got to your camp. Drygulched in a meadow where there are forty dead Clayburne sheep."

THE girl's cheeks had gone white.

"Will did that?"

"No. Somebody killed him and left him there to make folks believe he was shooting sheep and a Clayburne man got him. Fact, I don't even think Will was killed there, because I was in that meadow right after the sheep killing and he wasn't around then. I think some hom' re brought him there after he was dead."

The girl got out of her chair again.

"I'd better go back, Mart. There'll be trouble and I've got to warn Dad."

"I'll go with you."

Out on the boardwalk they paused as a small cavalcade of riders thundered down upon them. Two-ton Bromley's vast bulk and giant horse dominated the roadway. Behind him rode Robbie Sullivan and Bromley's deputies. They pulled up in a swirl of dust. Bromley shouted down to Jackson.

"Bert Sullivan's been killed! Robbie found him!"

The girl uttered a little cry. She stepped out into the dusty street and raised her arms toward Robbie Sullivan.

"Robbie, I'm sorry," she said.

The boy turned a white, strained face towards her. His eyes were glazed with grief, almost unseeing. His voice was husky, strained.

"You're sorry," he said. "I'm sorry—everybody's sorry. It's too late. Save your grief, Irene. It's the Sullivans against the Clayburnes now and I'm a Sullivan!"

His face worked as though he were fighting tears. Abruptly he wrenched his horse violently around and galloped up the street. Irene Clayburne stood in the boiling dust, her arms still half raised.

Jackson pulled her back to the boardwalk, his arm around her waist. She clung to him and he felt the first sobbing shudders begin to tear through her slim body. Over her head, conscious even in that moment of the perfume of her hair in his nostrils, he spoke to Bromley.

"I'll take Irene home, Two-ton and try to talk sense to Clayburne. You swear in every man you can get and burn leather after us. And hustle, if you want to stop a full-sized range war. The devil is loose with his pitchfork."

Moments later, Irene and Jackson were pounding out of town towards the sheep range of the Clayburnes. The girl had fought and conquered her tears. She was still-faced and quiet now, with only a faint smudge across one cheek which she had hastily wiped with a dusty hand. Only once during that frantic ride, did she refer to what had happened.

"Mart, you—you heard Robbie. Does that mean he's—through with me?"

So now he was giving advice to the lovelorn! Ah, but they were such good kids, Robbie and Irene, solid youngsters, honestly in love. What a pity the whole business was! Lives thrown away, lives ruined because men were too stubborn or too stupid to sit down together and talk their problems over.

"No, Irene," Jackson told her. "I don't think Robbie meant he was through with you. He meant that he can no longer stay out of the fight honorably. He tried to keep Bert from going after your dad and was knocked down for it. Now Bert's been killed—well, it's like he said, the Sullivans against the Clayburnes and he's got to fight or be called yellow."

"But my Dad didn't kill Bert—he couldn't have!"

"I hope we can prove that to Chris Sullivan before the shooting starts."

Their horses were blown and flecked with lather by the time they galloped out into the pine ringed meadow that held the Clayburne sheep camp. There were wagons here, covered wagons whose canvas tops were white against the dark green of the pines, and a "caravan," a wooden-sided wagon with doors and windows which was a houseboat on wheels. And there were sheep in the meadow and fuzzy, crying lambs which bounded erratically in all directions and bleated in thin little voices.

But none of these things caught their attention. For just in front of the groups of wagons was a struggling knot of men and horses. Jackson saw old Chris Sullivan and Robbie and with them Abe Weeks and Sam Cantrell and cowboys from both the Triple S and Flying W ranches. Some were mounted and one held a rope with open loop. On the ground, Cantrell and several cowboys wrestled with a tall man dressed in the overalls and flat-heeled boots which stamped him a sheepman.

JACKSON could see a woman there too, a faded and older Irene. She struggled silently but fiercely in the grip of the burly Cantrell until he threw her flat with a vicious shove. The next instant the rope in the hands of the cowboy darted out and dropped over Clayburne's head.

The noise and confusion of the struggle

kept the men from seeing Irene and Jackson as they approached. The girl uttered a little cry as she saw her father fighting the lynch law gang and clapped heels to her mount. The Government man did the only reasonable thing. He yanked his six-gun and loose a shot into the air.

At the crash of the gun every man in the group whipped his head around. Jackson pulled rein at the edge of the crowd, his gun weaving back and forth to cover all of them.

"Stand hitched!" he ordered. "Take that rope off Clayburne's neck!"

"It's that Government renegade!" Weeks howled. "Sam—Lefty—get that polecat!"

Jackson's gun roared. A Flying W cowboy cried out in pain and went down while Jackson's gun swung instantly to center on Cantrell.

"Go ahead and try it," he invited.

The Flying W *segundo* checked himself when his fingertips were grazing his gun butts. He waited, eyes burning into Jackson's.

Irene meanwhile, had flung herself from her horse and plunged into the crowd of men, fists and elbows flailing. She reached her father's side, yanked off the noose and hurried him out of the ring of captors. Mrs. Clayburne had picked herself up and the girl led both her parents to one side.

"Spread out, boys," Abe Weeks ordered. "Sam, you, me and Chris, we'll all go for our guns at once. Let's see which one of us Mister Jackson wants to kill before the other two cut his liver out!"

"Got yuh, Boss," Cantrell rasped.

"Now wait, Abe," old Chris protested. "This ain't like stringin' up a murderin' sheepman. Jackson's a Government man."

"He's runnin' with the sheepmen!" Weeks shouted. "Robbie, are you lettin' your brother's killer slip through our fingers?"

The youngster's face was drained of color. He was caught between the millstones of forces too great for him. His eyes moved from Weeks to Jackson and indecision, like pain, was written across his face.

IRENE came back into this deadlock with a .30-30 rifle. She pointed it at the tight little knot of cattlemen and spoke four words.

"Get out of here."

"Hold yore ground!" Weeks roared. "Men, with the Sullivans or without 'em—we're takin' Clayburne. You hear, Jackson? When I give the word go for your guns!"

The logical thing to do, Jackson realized, would be to cut down on Weeks at once and eliminate the spur that was driving the men to start shooting. But that might precipitate the very gun battle he was striving to avoid. He did not want to start the ball rolling.

Weeks' hand inched downward towards his gun butt. His mouth opened to give the signal. And into that tight moment, came the thunder of many hoofs. Two-ton Bromley and a posse surged over the skyline and roared down upon the sheep camp. The force of law and order had arrived.

The lawmen rode in between the cattlemen and their victims. From the height where he towered over all of them, Bromley roared his orders.

"There'll be no lynchings or shootings in this county long's I'm sheriff! Break it up, men! Get back!"

Jackson put his gun away and wiped clammy sweat off his face. He saw Irene lower her rifle and hurry back to her mother. Clayburne stood near the steps of the caravan. The cowboys drew off a bit and held their ground.

"Sullivan!" Bromley roared. "Are you makin' a formal charge of murder against Clayburne?"

"I am," old Chris replied. "Bert was bushwhacked on this land!"

"That's not evidence," Bromley replied. "I'll want a coroner's jury and an investigation before charges can be brought. That's the way I want it."

"And I suppose," Weeks shouted angrily, "that means Clayburne goes free?"

"It does."

"There you are," Weeks said, waving his arm violently at the cowmen. "That's our law. The cattlemen pay the sheriff's salary, pay the taxes for the county, and that's the protection we get. Does that prove we got to take the law into our own hands? Bromley, this is cow country—don't forget it. You ain't goin' to need a coroner's jury!"

Jackson lifted his voice. He spoke for himself now.

"Weeks, it's time someone called your bluff. You've been soundin' off, tryin' your best to make trouble and keep trouble boiling. You've stirred up necktie parties, bad feelings when more level heads than yours were trying to make peace. Now I'm calling you. Make your play or shut your mouth."

The blunt challenge flung down in the middle of the group brought a bristling silence. Weeks, Jackson knew, did not lack courage. His decision to fight a moment before even though he knew the first bullet very likely had his name on it, showed that. And now the hot rage poured up into his cheeks and his hand made an involuntary twitch. Then he checked himself as though he had thought of something. His eyes flicked towards his silent, watching shadow, Cantrell and back to Jackson.

"I'll take yore call, Jackson," he said. "But when I'm ready. I got things to do first that are more important. And one of those things is seein' that Senator Barton gets busy in Washington. You're goin' to be busted, Jackson, before the month is up!"

Weeks played his ace.

CHAPTER III

Death in the Dark

LATER Jackson found Irene sitting on the steps of the caravan with her face in her hands. At his approach she lifted her head to reveal a woe-begone, tear-stained face. Reaction and shock had claimed her, now that the actual crisis was past.

"He went away," she said brokenly, "He went away without a word or a look!"

"Robbie?" Jackson rolled a cigarette thoughtfully. "The kid's caught in a stampede, and it's ride or be trampled. He'll be all right when this is over."

She dried her eyes, tried to smile.

"What happens to our plan to get the cowmen and sheepmen together?"

"Poorer'n Job's turkey right now," Jackson said. "All the same I'm not going to renew those grazing leases until they make a deadline and stop fighting."

"They'll graze their cattle without leases and Weeks will get that senator to have you recalled."

Jackson shrugged his shoulders.

"Then I'll make my report to Washington and we'll see. I think Weeks is climbing Fool's Hill in a hurry. He can't get away with this, he's not fighting Injuns."

A lamb tugged at Jackson's chaps and bleated mournfully.

"He's hungry," Irene said. "His mother was one of those that were shot."

She went into the caravan and came out with a bottle of milk, with nipple attached. The lamb seized it and began sucking noisily.

The elder Clayburne approached.

"I'll say thanks, Mart," he said to Jackson. "You didn't get here any too soon. What's to be done now?"

"Start all over again," Jackson said. "Chris Sullivan is the most influential cowman in the country. I'm not giving up hope of convincing him."

"With Bert dead? You can't do it, Mart."

"There's nothing else to do."

"And meanwhile," Clayburne said darkly, "sheep will be killed and herders bushwhacked. Mart, we're not goin' to take it layin' down. The sheepmen are goin' to fight back!"

Those words echoed dismally in Jackson's mind as he rode away. His one ace so far had been his ability to restrain the sheepmen, if not the cowmen. With lead flying from both sides the fat was in the fire for sure.

Two days later a flock of sheep were stampeded south of Clayburne's range, twenty-seven killed and a herder wounded. The next day a Clayburne herder was ambushed and fourteen sheep killed before help arrived. The sheep herder was seriously hurt and expected to die.

These reports came to a melancholy Jackson and a morose Bromley. Two-ton had lost weight and had run four horses ragged in his attempt to keep up with the smouldering range war which broke out here and there and threatened at any moment to leap into full flame.

"You're from the government," Bromley complained to Jackson, "whyn't you do something?"

"Like what?" Jackson replied sourly.

He stepped out of Bromley's office into a cold, clear night. There was a keen wind moving down from Wapiti range and the stars seemed big and near. The town was quiet and the street deserted. Tension had accumulated in Elkhorn until it hung over the country like a pall. There was a brooding, smoldering quiet that was not peace, but only the prelude to violence.

Jackson went down the street to his office where he bunked on a cot in back and went to bed. He was a healthy man and in spite of his troubles, he dropped off and slept easily.

Some indeterminate time later he came upright in alarm. There was a steady tapping at the side window. He reached for his six-gun on the chair at the side of the cot, then moved to the window. It was open a few inches from the bottom and he whispered through the aperture.

"Who is it?"

"Robbie Sullivan! I've got to talk to yuh."

Jackson let him in.

"Don't light a lamp," Robbie said in an urgent whisper. He began to stride up and down in the dark. "Mart, I can't stand this no more. Dad has gone off his head since Bert was killed and Weeks—you know how he's been. They're getting up a big gang of riders tonight and they're goin' to clean out Clayburne for good."

JACKSON was busy pulling on his levis and boots.

"Where are they?" he asked.

"At our ranch. They're crazy, Mart. They're talking about killing the sheep and burning the wagons. They're liable to hurt Irene!"

"All right, kid." Jackson stood up, buckling on his gun-belt. "You did right coming here. Now you pound leather for the Clayburne's. Warn them to get their sheep out of the valley and scatter 'em in the hills. Move the wagons —hide 'em. Weeks will track them, of course, but it'll hold them up, give us time. Now ride!"

"Where you goin' to be, Mart?"

"I'll stop and tell the sheriff, then I'll head for the Triple S and see if I can stop your dad

before he gets started. There's just a chance I can."

"Not tonight," Robbie said, shaking his head. "He's been broodin' over Bert."

He slipped out and disappeared in the dark.

Jackson got his hat and went for his horse. Surprisingly, he felt something much like a sense of relief as he headed into the hills after warning Bromley. The showdown was here and at least he knew what must be done. The worst of it was always the waiting for something to happen. That was over. He could forget he was an official of the Department of Interior. He was Mart Jackson again, a range rider who could throw lead with the best of them. And perhaps the time had come when Weeks and Cantrell were ready to call his bluff.

He smiled tightly in the dark, fingering the deputy sheriff badge which Bromley had pressed upon him.

It was still full black, though the smell of dawn was in the air when he reached the Triple S. He left his horse and went forward cautiously on foot. The big ranchhouse was dark, but there was a flickering light in the barn and he turned in that direction. A horse snorted in the darkness and stamped. Jackson made out the shape of a spring wagon to which two horses were hitched. He went forward and ran his hand over the bed.

There were kegs and wads of cotton tow and axes stacked in the wagon. Carefully he pulled the cork from a keg and bent his nostrils to it. The rank smell of kerosene came up. So it was to be lead and fire, as Robbie had said.

He paused in the open double doors of the barn. A lantern burned on the floor and beside it stood Abe Weeks, drawing lines in the dust with a stick. Silent Cantrell was close beside him, as always, and in a ring around them, the cowboys of the Triple S and the Flying W and the Rocking H and the other ranches of Elkhorn county.

"Am I interruptin'?" Jackson drawled.

Every head twisted in his direction. Weeks was for a moment, frozen over his stick, then a tight little grin moved across his face.

"It's the Government man," he said softly. "You're just in time, Jackson, just in time to see this range go back to cows where it belongs."

Jackson shook his head.

"No, you've got that wrong. It's to tell you to quit, Weeks, or to take up that invitation where you dropped it last time."

Weeks darted a glance sideways at Cantrell.

"Is that so?" he rasped. "Well, now, maybe you're plumb right. Maybe the time has come."

His hand flashed downward and smoothly. Like another part of the same well-oiled machine, Sam Cantrell's arm swept in an arc for his gun. Jackson was moving with them. Even in that infinitesimal part of a second, he had picked his mark. It would be suicide to shoot at either man, for the remaining one would get him. He shot, instead, at the lantern on the floor and saw it fly into a million pieces as he threw himself flat and felt slugs hammer over his head.

Darkness had swooped over the barn as the lantern smashed, but orange streaks of flame stabbed the gloom, giving weird, fragmentary pictures of men shooting, darting forward doubled over. Jackson rolled frantically out of the doorway and the line of fire, holding his own shots.

Then he realized suddenly, that they were between him and the door, his retreat was cut off. At the same moment there was a strange leaping glow in the air and figures began to materialize out of the gloom. Little tongues of flame were running along the barn floor, where the spilled kerosene had caught fire.

"There he is!"

A SHOT roared, close to him. Jackson got to his feet and instantly flying figures struck him. He was knocked off balance and went down while fierce hands clawed and struck at him and feet pounded as the others rushed up and flung themselves into the fight.

Something heavy crashed on his head and at the sickening jolt of pain the entire barn, with its little leaping flames swung crazily. Strength went out of his limbs and left them like water. He was dragged to his feet and his arms pinioned. While some of the men hastily stamped out the flames which were crawling toward the hay, Jackson was trussed up against one of the upright wooden pillars which supported the high arched roof of the barn.

As his eyes cleared, he saw the men trooping hastily out the door. Abe Weeks stopped before him and tested the ropes.

"Yuh'll hold," he grunted. "Thank yore lucky star, Jackson, yuh're alive. We ain't anxious to kill yuh. But yuh're through on Wapiti range. When we come back from cleanin' out that nest of sheepers yuh're gettin' out of this country."

Jackson's eyes met those of old Chris Sullivan. The old rancher looked troubled and morose. Grief and rage had burned harsh lines in his face and aged him visibly in the short week that had passed. He said nothing and in a moment he and Weeks followed the men out and Jackson was left alone. In a moment Jackson heard the soft clop of many hoofs and presently they faded away and were gone. He was left in the darkness of the big old barn.

The sweetness of hay was in his nostrils and the rich mealiness of oats and grain dust—all the familiar, nostalgic smell of a barn. After a while there were small scurrying sounds as the rats emerged from their hiding place. The door was partly open and through it he could see the night sky and the bright glitter of the stars.

High up near the roof, a soundless shadow blotted out the stars for a second and he knew

that the barn owl, disturbed by the men, had come home. A second later a rat squealed sharply and there was a tiny scuffle. The owl had found hunting.

Methodically, Jackson tested the ropes which held him to the pillar and found them good. There would be no wriggling loose. He leaned against the roughness of the wood and tried to straighten out his thoughts.

So he'd failed. He was not a lawman, in spite of the deputy's badge Two-ton Bromley had given him, and his job was not to enforce the peace. His job was to renew grazing leases. Yet if open and bloody war broke out between cowman and sheepmen, everything for which he had worked would be gone in powdersmoke.

It was best for all that sheep and cattle be given a fair share of grass and water, for each had its part and none could say which was the more important. The Government wanted it so. And Martin Jackson, limited though his powers were, was the only Government representative here in Colorado Territory. His responsibility, he felt, went far beyond the clerical business of issuing leases.

He'd failed. And the Interior Department, learning that peace was not to be, might find its whole program of public land use and conservation damaged by the reckless, selfish war of men who could not, or would not, use reason. He stood in the darkness of the barn and sought for a way out and found none.

The barn door creaked. The dim bulk of a man slid between Jackson and the stars.

"Who is it?" Jackson asked. "You can quit crawlin', I'm tied!"

"Sh-h-h, it's Cookie."

"Sullivan's cook?"

"Yep."

He felt rather than saw the man materialize before him and an exploring hand came out of the dark and touched his face.

"The old man passed me the word to turn you loose when they were a good piece gone," Cookie breathed. His fingers found the bound wrists and a knife sawed at the ropes. "What's that?" he whispered sharply.

A soft sound had come from outside, a sound so vague they could, neither of them, identify it. Cookie's knife stopped its motion.

Startlingly, a match flared near them. The flame gouged a hole in the blackness, beat down on a man's sombrero, a shadowed face. With a sickening drop of the heart, Jackson made out Cantrell's sullen, craggy features.

THE gunman held the match high. A six-gun gleamed in his fist. Beside Jackson, Cookie loosed a gasp, made an involuntary move. It had been a move of fright, of escape. But the gun in Cantrell's fist blasted deafeningly in their faces. Cookie's face twisted in shock and amazement. The knife slid from his fingers, he bent at the middle and crumpled to the floor.

As Cantrell's eyes followed him down, Mart Jackson threw all his strength against the half-cut ropes. They snapped, just as the match in Cantrell's fingers went out and the darkness clamped down again.

Jackson went down, down in a flat dive at the gunman's ankles. Cantrell's weapon roared again. He had not seen Jackson's movement and needed no light for the point-blank shot at such close range. But the lurid flare of muzzle flame split the darkness and showed him an empty pillar just as the Government man's plunging body snapped his feet out from under him and they went rolling over the hay-strewn boards.

Jackson heard the thump of the heavy six-gun striking wood and the scuffle of Cantrell's boots. Then silence. He lay with his cheek against the boards and strands of hay tickling his face, wondering if Cantrell still had his gun or had dropped it.

If he had it, he would feel safe, he'd be moving. His silence was eloquent indication that he too did not know where the gun was. But the one who moved now would betray his position to the other.

Jackson put out a hand cautiously and moved it in a semi-circle before him. He touched nothing. There was the faintest sound ahead somewhere—Cantrell was moving. Jackson heard the drag of his clothes over the floor. He was searching for the gun.

Perhaps it was best to find and jump him now—if neither had the gun it would be at least an equal bare-handed struggle. Jackson began to draw his legs up under him. Then Cantrell took a chance. For the second time, a match flared.

In the sudden light, Jackson saw the gunman crouched on his knees a few feet away. He saw the dull shine of the six-gun to Cantrell's right. Too far!

The gunman lunged for his weapon. Jackson kicked out with his legs like a frog in an effort to throw himself on Cantrell's back. He fell over Cookie's body. He saw Cantrell scoop up the gun triumphantly. Then the match went out. In the same instant, Jackson felt the nick of Cookie's knife against his hand.

It was a butcher knife from the kitchen, a heavy, long-bladed tool. He found the handle, his fingers closed on it and he rolled frantically away from the spot.

Flame lanced the darkness again and the deafening roar of the shot boomed in the barn as in a cave. Jackson saw Cantrell's dim form outlined behind the orange flare and knew that it was now or never. He leaped and slashed down savagely with the knife.

Cantrell had sensed his coming and tried to dodge. The knife missed, but their bodies crashed together and sprawled flat again. Jackson was on top and from their position he knew where Cantrell's right arm should be. His left hand found the gun wrist as it was rising

from the floor. He slammed it back and put his knee on it.

His freed left hand flashed to Cantrell's face, heeled his chin back while he put the knife point where it would lightly bite into the gunman's throat.

"Rest easy," he panted, "or I'll pin you to the floor!"

Cantrell's muscles relaxed. Jackson let the knife dig in slightly while with his left hand he fumbled in his vest and produced a match. He scratched it on the floor and held it over Cantrell's face.

"All right, talk!" he said.

Cantrell's eyes gleamed up at him with their sullen defiance unbroken. He said nothing, just matched his stare against Jackson's.

The knife point went in deeper and a little red stain appeared and began to trace a thin line downward.

"What do yuh want to know?" Cantrell choked out.

"Why'd you come back? Just to kill me?"

HE SAW assent in the gunman's eyes.

"Why?"

"Weeks planned it. He wanted yuh found dead here so Sullivan would be blamed—mebbe arrested. With Bert an 'Robbie out of the way—" He left the rest unsaid, nor did he need to say any more.

For the first time Jackson saw what he should have seen from the beginning. Weeks had gulched Bert Sullivan, not the sheepherders. Weeks had undoubtedly killed Will Potter, too—Jackson had been sure the sheepmen wouldn't have done it when Potter came as a hope for peace. Now Weeks thought he could rid himself of Jackson by murder, and Sullivan by pinning the blame on him, and that would leave only young Robbie. The way would then be clear for Weeks to gain control of the whole rich Wapiti range.

So this at last was the answer to Abe Weeks' persistent stirring up of trouble, his fierce demands for war.

The match burned his fingers and startled, he dropped it. In that brief second of preoccupation, Cantrell acted. His body surged up under Jackson as he threw all his energy into a lunge to rip his gun arm out from under the confining knee.

Jackson felt the gun wrist tear itself free from under him. But the move unbalanced him. Without intention on his part he started to slip and all his weight came down on his knife arm.

He felt the blade go in sickeningly and crunch against the wooden floor.

After a moment Jackson pushed himself away and crouched in the darkness. His stomach churned in nausea. But he fought it down, found another match and struck it. He had kept his promise. Cantrell was pinned to the floor.

CHAPTER IV

Showdown in Lead

THE keen dawn wind off Elk Mountain blew the last sickness out of Jackson's brain as Cantrell's horse carried him up into sheep country. He had paused for nothing but to see that Cookie was beyond help, to snatch up Cantrell's six-gun and find Cantrell's horse, before starting on the cooling trail of the cowmen. Now, two hours up on the wooded benches of Clayburne's sheep range, he had lost the trail in the darkness and was heading as straight as he could toward the spot where last the sheep camp had stood.

The east was growing lighter and the pointed, stiff tops of the pines were coming into silhouette like irregular teeth in a giant's mouth. A cottontail fled in panic before the sound of his horse's hoofs. Birds ringed him in a circle of melody which traveled with him as he rode.

The sun was pushing its first fiery fingers over the pines as he came into Clayburne's meadow and his nose told him before his eyes that the cattlemen had been here. A pungent, gagging smoke was on the breeze as he came in, amongst the meadow birches he saw the cause.

A pile of ashes and smouldering timber ends marked the spot where the caravan and the canvas-topped wagon had stood. Mules lay dead in their harness. And around the meadow, like pathetic bunches of wool, were the bodies of ewes and lambs that had been held in this small meadow for feeding.

His horse shied and rolled his eyes wildly at the smell of blood. He was so nervous that Jackson tied him to a tree before getting down. Then, with heavy foreboding, he searched the ruins of the wagons for human bodies. There were, at least, none here. Apparently whoever had been here had time to get out, leaving only the wagons and animals for the punchers to vent their wrath upon.

Jackson got back into the saddle and headed over the ridge for the valley beyond. This was the grazing range proper and the place he had sent Robbie with instructions to move the flocks.

Apparently Robbie had delivered his message, for when Jackson topped the brushy ridge he looked down upon a vast tilted meadowland bare of sheep. But on the edge of the trees he saw horses and the tiny figures of men, both grounded and mounted. He had caught up to the cattleman.

They had stopped, either to rest or to discuss their next move, but Jackson wasted no

time watching them. He put his horse in motion again and began to pick his way around the meadow so as to get ahead of them and remain out of sight.

The ridge he was following sloped down into the pines and here he could run his mount. There was no sound of hoofs on the soft mat of dry needles. He bent low in the saddle to avoid the dead branches which stuck out straight from the resinous trunks like spears.

When he started to climb again on the far side of the meadow, he looked back. The cattlemen were mounting, getting ready to move. But they were behind him now.

Jackson came into the notch between the mountains and struck the trail of the sheep. The earth had been churned into a muddy highway by thousands of sharp little hoofs, making a trail no one could miss. Only if Clayburne and the other sheepmen had time to get their flocks clear off Wapiti range could a slaughter be avoided.

The trail climbed into a world of rocky boulders and twisted, leaning trees. Here on the top of the world the wind came fresh and strong and the brim of his sombrero flapped like a sail. He was urging his horse along recklessly, not watching too closely and was taken completely by surprise when the two men with rifles stepped out in the trail.

Jackson pulled his horse in. They were sheepmen and there was nothing friendly about their faces or the way in which they held their rifles. He glanced behind him and saw a third man from behind a boulder to block his retreat.

"Hey!" he protested. "I'm Mart Jackson. Where's Clayburne?"

"He's here," said one of the riflemen. "Get down."

"Now wait a minute," Jackson said hurriedly. "I'm a Government man."

"I don't care who yuh are!" the sheepman spat. "Yuh look like a cowboy to me!"

"I tell you Clayburne knows me."

"We'll take yuh to Clayburne and let him speak for yuh. Get down!"

JACKSON slid off his horse. The man in back of him moved up and with his rifle barrel prodded him into motion. They took him off the trail, one leading his horse, and into the rocks. Then he saw what he had ridden into.

The sheepmen had prepared an ambush. They had brought their flocks through here and sent them on with the boys and women. Then, every man capable of holding a rifle had backtracked to this spot where the boulders made a natural fort and here they had laid a trap for the cattlemen.

The pursuers would be following the sheep tracks, confident that sheep and men were running as hard as they could. Whipped up by Abe Weeks' frenzy they would know no caution. They'd run into this ambush and hidden rifles would cut them down like grain. There'd be no chance.

Looking around, Jackson saw how little chance they had. Every rock sheltered a grim-faced rifleman in sheepherder's overalls. Cartridges were laid out ready to hand, rifles were poised on stone rests. Each man there knew it was kill or be killed. They were ready.

Clayburne came striding to meet them. He was bare-headed as was his custom, and his face was pale with strain, but grim-lipped and unyielding. He, too, carried a rifle.

"Clayburne, you can't do this!" Jackson burst out. "It's murder!"

"Is it?" the sheepman said. "Wasn't it murder when the cowmen gulched our herders, shot down our sheep, burned our wagons?"

"But listen—the whole trouble's been caused by Abe Weeks. I got the story out of his gunman, Cantrell."

"Will they listen to you?" Clayburne asked bitterly. "Jackson, you saved my life, I'm beholden to you. But stay out of this, for your own sake. I can't stop these men and I wouldn't try. It's their lives or the cattlemen's."

"But this is a massacre!"

"And what would it be if we let them catch us and our sheep?"

He turned to Jackson's guards.

"Bring him back out of harm's way." Then he was off, striding among the boulders to take his place with his men.

Jackson's guards urged him toward the rear of the ambush. One took his six-gun. They climbed up part way of one of the side hills and in a grassy spot closely surrounded by boulders the size of a house they came to a stop. Irene Clayburne was there and Robbie Sullivan. The boy was lying on his back, tied hand and foot and the girl sat glumly by his side, her face a picture of misery.

"So," Jackson said softly. "That's your reward for coming and warning them?"

"He'll take no harm," one of his guards said. "But we won't have him warning the cowboys. His father's with them."

Jackson sat down on the grass near the youngsters. Two of his guards turned back, one remained, lounging against a boulder with his rifle in the crook of his arm.

Robbie's eyes flashed.

"They're gulchin' my Dad—and his men?" he asked.

Jackson nodded.

"I didn't think that's what would happen, when I warned them," the boy said miserably. "If Dad's hurt, it'll be my doing."

Jackson looked at the girl interrogatively.

"I promised Father I wouldn't untie him," she said unhappily. "Otherwise, he'd have sent me on with the others."

"You wouldn't break your promise, of course," Jackson said, stretching out on his back.

"No," she whispered, head low.

"There are times," the Government man said, "when breaking a promise, or telling a lie, might stop something worse than the lie. Wouldn't you say it was justified then?"

His left hand, shielded from sight of the guard by his body, slid a jackknife from his pocket. At the pressure of his thumb, the blade snicked open.

"I don't know," the girl said. Her head was still low and she did not see what Jackson was doing.

ROBBIE'S face came alive as he felt the pressure of the knife edge against the cords.

"Shore now," Jackson pursued. "Good and evil are words which are mighty interchangeable it seems to me. Sometimes doin' what you think is good brings about some mighty bad results. And sometimes you've got to act plumb ornery to get some good done."

The guard spat disgustedly and turned his head away from them to crane down into the pass at the backs of his fellows and see if anything was happening. He heard the first ringing clash of steel-shod hoofs on rocks far below and stretched his neck to look further. The cattlemen were not yet in sight amongst the trees and he turned an excited face toward the prisoners and the girl.

"They're comin'—" he started and his voice died away in astonishment. Robbie Sullivan was sitting up, his hands free.

"Hey!" said the guard and leaped forward. His orders were not to shoot, and this placed him at a disadvantage. For as his legs came abreast of Jackson's reclining form, the Government man gathered in his ankles and cut him down.

They swarmed over him as he hit the ground. Jackson wrenched the rifle away.

"Run for the timber!" he ordered Robbie.

Then he pointed the muzzle of the rifle to the sky and pulled trigger.

The report boomed and echoed among the rocks, flinging itself back and forth until it sounded like the multiple shots of a hundred guns. There was an excited shout far below and faintly Jackson heard Chris Sullivan's bellow.

"Hunt cover! It's an ambush!"

A roar went up from the sheepmen and rifles began to crack. Jackson flipped his hand at Irene, sitting helplessly, and dashed after Robbie into the trees.

The fat was in the fire so far as war between the two factions. But this much he had accomplished by his warning to the cowmen. He had averted a massacre which would have only serious consequences. And since both sides were not holed up in strong positions in the rocks, the result would probably be a stalemate and perhaps serious loss of life could be avoided.

[*Turn page*]

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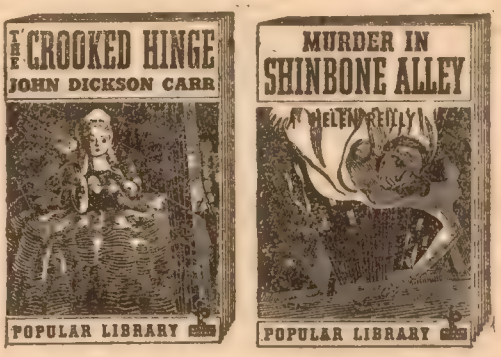

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PW-5

He ducked amongst rocks and tree trunks, working his way down lower and looking for Robbie. Once or twice he called, although his voice was lost in the erratic popping of guns which kept the echoes dancing. Robbie would probably head downhill to get back to his father and Jackson too wanted to go there. Since the sheepmen no longer needed his help, there was some unfinished business he had with Abe Weeks.

He began to get nervous as he slid and clambered lower on the slope. He was now actually between the fighting forces, although to one side and still upon the side hill. However, as soon as the men began to outflank one another they might run onto him and he would be considered an enemy by both sides.

Lead whined or screamed shrilly as it ricocheted off the rocks. Some of the men shouted taunts at one another. Then Jackson heard new voices, quieter, in the woods just ahead. He took off his sombrero and inched his head cautiously around a fallen log.

Abe Weeks was there. He was standing with his back to Jackson, his six-gun covering Robbie Sullivan. Sunlight filtered down through the pine branches to dapple their faces with light and shadow. Except for Robbie's arms, raised in the air, they almost seemed to be talking quietly.

"It ain't enough to kill you," Weeks said. "I want yuh to know why."

"I know why," Robbie said contemptuously. "Cause you're a murderin' polecat!"

"Brave, ain't you?" Weeks sneered. "Listen. I could have been the biggest rancher on Wapiti if yore old man didn't beat me out. Well, I will be now. I got Bert and it was blamed on the sheepmen. I'll plug you and it'll be blamed on the sheepmen. By now Cantrell has taken care of that snoop Jackson in yore barn, and that'll be blamed on yore old man. That'll take the Sullivans and the sheepmen out of the way—and leave me boss of Wapiti range."

"You're wrong, Weeks," Jackson said quietly behind him. "Cantrell didn't take care of me."

Abe Weeks swung, snarling like a puma. His six-gun chopped around in a deadly arc. Jackson pointed his rifle like a hand-gun and felt it kick as he pulled the trigger.

ROBBIE gulped and began to breathe again.

"Boy, am I glad to see you!" he said. He bent to pick up Weeks' pistol. "Now let's go find Dad."

With Robbie leading, they made their way into the cattlemen's lines without drawing fire. Lying flat behind a rock they found old Chris Sullivan. Jackson told his story.

"So you see," he concluded, "it was Weeks who killed Potter and Bert—Weeks or Cantrell. It's those two who have been stirring up this war. Now, Chris, are you going to let it go on—let more men be killed?"

The owner of the Triple S turned a haggard face on the Government man.

"How can I stop it now?" he muttered.

"You got a white handkerchief in your pocket?" Jackson asked sardonically.

Old Chris stared at him a moment, his face like granite. Then he showed the courage of the Sullivans. He yanked a big white handkerchief from his hip pocket and tied it around the muzzle of his gun.

"You men!" he roared. "Stop firing!"

The cowboys' shooting died. Chris hoisted the rifle barrel and white flag above his rock. After a moment the sheepmen's fire stopped.

"Well, here goes," Chris Sullivan muttered and heaved his big body upright in plain view.

There was an instant's dreadful tension. But no shots came from the sheep-herder's rocks. Chris walked out into the middle of the trail. Jackson came behind him and Robbie.

"Clayburne!" Sullivan boomed. "I've just learned a few things an' I'm callin' off the shooting. Come out and palaver!"

Bare-headed, Clayburne rose up from behind the rocks and moved out into the open. They heard an anxious voice beseeching him to be careful, warning him of a trap.

"It's no trap!" Sullivan roared. "That trouble maker, Abe Weeks, has got the lead slug he's earned. Come out an' talk peace."

They met in the middle of the trail. Jackson's story was told and backed up by Robbie Sullivan.

"I've been a bull-headed old fool," Sullivan rumbled. "It's cost good men's lives. Clayburne, the government wants a deadline for cattle an' sheep. I'm convinced and my word carries weight with the others. Will you and yore men meet us cowmen in Jackson's office tomorrer and draw up an agreement?"

"We will," Clayburne said, his eyes shining.

"There's my hand," Sullivan boomed. "I never thought I'd shake a sheepman's hand."

Hoofbeats floated up from below and then a long-drawn hail.

"Two-ton Bromley," Jackson said. "I told him to bring a posse. There's no work for them now."

He glanced up at the rocks and saw Irene coming, her hair blowing loose in the wind.

"There's another agreement coming up soon," he said to old Sullivan.

●

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Bonzo's teeth caught hold of Jimmy's coat

BONZO COMES HOME

By VERNE CHUTE

A rangeland pup hears the call of the wild but answers a little boy's cry instead—and Cheela, the lioness, is spared!

THE Mojave sun, rushing toward the meridian in a hot desert sky, was slanting down into the yard of Dal Burnet's Box-B Ranch. Its young owner pulled his saddle horse to a sliding stop. Dal Burnet leaped to the ground and began yelling for Old Harvey, the grizzled foreman.

The shouting awakened a small black dog from his cool spot in Ann Burnet's flower-bed. He awoke running, made a wild, yelping dive for the hole under the saddle-shed. Bonzo always did this in the interest of safety. Then his procedure was to stick his nose out to see what had scared him.

Bonzo had taken all the ranch yard pitfalls in stride, one by one, learning the

ropes by the system of trial and error. He didn't miss many. It was considered a miracle when the small dog safely reached the age of five months. Nothing more, it seemed, could possibly happen to him. Least of all, none would believe that soon the men of the Box-B Ranch would be hunting him down with rifles!

While Dal Burnet was still shouting, Bonzo stuck his nose from under the floor of the saddle-shed. Now he would see what things were all about.

Old Harvey, the lanky foreman, came loping up from the barn. His spurs clanked musically against the hard ground.

"It's that Cheela again!" cried Dal. His blue eyes turned hard as he jerked his head toward the brushy hills back of the ranch yard. "Just found her tracks beside a fresh kill. That makes three calves she's got this week!"

The foreman came to a full stop, rubbed his sun-faded brows. He spat sagely on the ground. "All this killin' means that Cheela's got cubs. A mountain lion is that way. When one of them's got cubs they're always tryin' to show off by draggin' in more than the cubs can eat!"

Dal wiped the sweat from his brow and looked worried. "If we had the time—" But he didn't finish his sentence. Looking off toward Cloudburst, he said, "We'll get somebody out from town. Cheela's got to be smoked out!"

OLD HARVEY straightened his gaunt frame. "Boss, I'd like to take a crack at that two hundred *pesos* the Association has put up on Cheela's head."

Dal agreed readily, in spite of the work to be done. "You're elected!" he snapped. "Yuh can even take a couple of the boys."

Old Harvey grinned. "No mountain lion's going to make a sucker out of us, eh, Boss? Inside of a coupla days we'll have the Box-B brand in her hide." He strode toward the barn where a couple of Box-B riders were leading their mounts out of the corral.

Bonzo tumbled out from beneath the saddle-shed flooring. He looks uncertainly around him as if trying to remember what had scared him. Whatever it was it wasn't important now. He gave a soft bark of delight and began to roll toward the kitchen floor. The cook had just put out a nicely-polished pair of Sunday boots for him to worry.

But Charley, the cook, saw him first. Bonzo dug in his forefeet, slid to a stop, reversed and hit back into the yard. With the cook's wild yells ringing in his ears, he dived under the floor of the saddle-shed again.

After a while he heard his name called by Ann Burnet, the mother of three-year-old Jimmy. Jimmy added his excited—"Bonzo! Bonzo!"

Bonzo crept out of the place of his self-imposed solitude. Jimmy was more fun anyway, than a polished riding boot. Jimmy had blue eyes like his dad, was a tow head. And he was active enough to toddle off into the desert if they didn't keep an eye on him. Bonzo and Jimmy had a good romp together.

Late in the afternoon, with Jimmy back in the house taking a nap, Bonzo lay under the cool shade with one eye cocked open so as not to miss anything. He watched Old Harvey and one of the cowboys ride into the yard, saw Dal Burnet come hurrying out of the house.

"You're back early," said Dal. "Any luck?"

Old Harvey smirked. "Plenty. We've got Cheela's cubs. Better keep clear of 'em, Boss. The little devils are twice as fast as lightnin'!"

"Nice work," cried Dal. But his eyes were anxious. "What about Cheela? And where'd yuh get these cubs?"

Old Harvey told him as he slipped from his saddle and helped Dal with the sacks the other cowboys handed down. "We found Cheela's nest about three miles from here. It was up past the first saddle on the Furnace Canyon ridge, a den in the rocks. I left Riley up there with a rifle to potshot Cheela when she came back."

Dal grinned. "Well, well, this is somethin'."

Bonzo, who had been an interested spectator, wrinkled his nose and sniffed. Here was something he'd have to investigate. The smell that came to his nostrils was strange and exciting. He leaped back when the men dumped two furry yellow balls out of the two gunnysacks. The lion cubs were fat and sleek and yellow-eyed. They arched their backs, spat a couple of times, then crept together.

This was something new for Bonzo. He sniffed and came closer. There seemed no danger. Probably it was just two more things brought home for him to play with. He'd worry the one on the right first.

Bonzo walked boldly in, where a desert-born sheep dog would have feared to tread.

Old Harvey nudged Dal. "Watch the pup," he said.

Bonzo gave the cub a playful push with his nose. In a friendly gesture he nipped one of the furry paws.

Then everything seemed to happen at once. Lightning struck from the clear sky! Bonzo went over backward, his nose slashed, a taste of needles in his shoulder. Only the fact that the yellow menace was between him and the saddle-shed, kept him from diving for the hole under it.

The men howled with laughter. Old Harvey slapped his thigh.

"Lesson a hundred and seven!" he cried. "Wowie! Did yuh see that?"

Bonzo walked backward for another twenty feet and sat on his haunches. He cocked his small head to one side, stared with injured surprise. He rubbed his injured nose with a disgusted gesture that made the men howl even more. But Bonzo was through with anything that remotely looked or acted like a furry cactus plant. His gesture said they could have it. He didn't want any part of it.

DAL grinned and looked beyond the corral fences toward the hills. "Better hitch up the buckboard, Harvey. We'd better get the cubs into Cloudburst before Cheela arrives to take them back."

"Don't worry about Cheela. Riley will take care of her, and Riley can knock a piñon cone off a tree at a hundred yards. Yeah, if the Association will pay two hundred for Cheela they ought to pay fifty apiece for her cubs."

Dal nodded. "I'll go in with yuh. There's some things I want to get."

When Bonzo saw the young mountain lions put back into the sack and carried over to the buckboard, he cocked his head to the other side. Good riddance. He didn't need them. He still had Jimmy, and Jimmy had no burning claws, no sharp teeth.

A half-hour after the cub's departure, life was back to normal in the Box-B yard. Jimmy was still taking his nap, the cowboy had ridden off, and the yard was practically deserted. Bonzo lay back in the cool shade and watched the wild bees buzzing around the pool of water made by the overflow from the watering trough. Bonzo felt too lazy to chase them.

He suddenly remembered a discarded boot he could worry. A boot was different. He always had time for a boot. He lumbered to his feet, started across the yard to get it.

It was at this same moment that the mountain lioness came down out of the hills looking for her stolen cubs. Old Harvey had been wrong about Cheela. Riley hadn't even got a shot at her. Long, lithe and lean, she slipped through the brush like a yellow shadow. Her eyes flamed red fire and her tail lashed her sides, telling of the fury that burned within her.

There are times when even the barking of a small dog can set a mountain lion to flight. But this wasn't one of those times. Cheela was dangerous to man or beast now. Cheela, mother-instinct rampant, was looking for her cubs.

She wound her sinuous way noiselessly to the corral fence of the Burnet Ranch. The wind was toward her, so no lion smell wafted into the yard or corrals to send the livestock into paroxysms of fear. She glared into the yard.

The only moving thing was a shaggy, black puppy dragging a boot across the yard. Cheela watched the small dog for a while, her tail moving slowly, her ears back. Then she was leaping the low board fence that enclosed the ranch yard.

Bonzo wasn't missed until the cook went to feed him at supper time. A quick search of Bonzo's haunts—the step under the door, the calf pens, the hole under the saddle-shed brought no results.

No Bonzo.

Ann thought that Bonzo might have followed the wagon into Cloudburst. But Dal and Old Harvey coming back from town put an end to that surmise. They hadn't seen him. After dark, Riley rode down from the mountain canyon to report that he had seen no trace of Cheela, nor of Bonzo. No one thought to blame Cheela for Bonzo's disappearance nor to look for lion tracks in the yard.

Old Harvey said at the supper table,

"Mebbe Cheela came down and made a meal of him. Say, I was hoping she'd follow us into Cloudburst. Two hundred dollars on the hoof! That would be something!"

Dal grunted. "You should kick. Yuh got fifty for her cubs." He smiled sideways at Ann who was looking at little Jimmy. "I reckon we've got to get out and find what's happened to that pup."

But the days went by and not a trace of Bonzo did they find. He seemed to have disappeared into thin air. It wasn't Jimmy alone who missed him. The whole ranch missed him, from the cook to the riders down at the bunkhouse, who were forever yelling at him for making off with their boots.

When, finally, all search for him was given up it was decided that he had just wandered off and fallen into the clutches of coyotes ganging up on him. Even then none blamed Cheela seriously.

Cheela had stopped her forays against the stock. No calves were killed in the next month. As the foreman put it:

"Shore looks like Old Cheela's packed up her soogans and hit the trail."

SUNDAY morning some four months after the odd disappearance of Bonzo, Charley and Old Harvey were looking over a horse Dal had just bought. Ann joined them, carrying Jimmy. It was she who was the first to see the dark spot weaving back and forth on the road. She caught her husband's arm.

"Look, Dal! Do you see what I see?"

Dal looked—and stared. Then he whistled under his breath. "It looks like a dog— Say—it's Bonzo!"

Old Harvey snorted. "If that's Bonzo I'll eat a musty cowhide!"

"Get Harvey the salt," said the cook. "There's no other black dog in these parts. But he's changed right smart. He's long, stretched out, and lean. Looks like a coyote the way he pads along that road."

Jimmy, hearing the magic name of his dog, slid from his mother's arms.

"Bonzo! Bonzo!" he cried, running.

Dal ran after him, picked him up. "Wait," he said. "The dog might be mad, or he might have turned bad. Get back outta sight, all of you. We'll see if he's all right."

Behind the saddle-shed they watched as the small dog came leaping into the yard. It was Bonzo all right. But what a Bonzo! No longer a puppy, he was a grown dog now. A bewildered, shaggy, black dog that didn't seem at all sure of himself.

Everything came under his gaze—the saddle-shed, the bunkhouse, the kitchen door. Then his liquid brown eyes began searching for something else that should be there. He was looking for little Jimmy.

Jimmy helped a lot by yelling out: "Bonzo! Bonzo!" He wriggled out of his dad's arms.

Bonzo let out a happy bark and came running. Before Dal could pick Jimmy up again, Bonzo was barking joyously as he leaped all over Jimmy trying to kiss his face. Then Bonzo was leaping away in ever-widening circles, barking and cutting fancy corners to show how happy he was.

The Box-B was speechless. No one there had ever expected to see Bonzo again, and here he was running circles around the yard.

"What do you think has happened to him, Dal?" Ann cried out. "Where's he been?"

Dal could only shake his head and look at Old Harvey. Ann was explicit on one point.

"He'll have to take a bath before he plays with my son!" she said.

Old Harvey grinned. "From the gaunt sides of him he looks like he needs a meal, too. Come on, Charley, let's feed him."

They started toward the kitchen. Bonzo, seeming to remember that part of it, followed, walking sideways so as not to lose sight of Jimmy back in his mother's arms.

In the days that followed, Bonzo showed in every way possible how glad he was to be back. The baths nettled and made his hide itchy, but he soon found a way to overcome that by ploughing into the soft dirt around the haystack.

Slowly he began to shake off the strange ways he had acquired during his four-months' absence. At night when the coyotes howled, or when strange odors came to him on the wind he became restless. Often he would stand by the hour staring into the darkness toward Furnace Creek Canyon.

For a time, the mystery of Bonzo's absence was the topic of conversa-

tion around the Box-B Ranch. Then the big preparation for the Fourth of July celebration on the Laird Ranch, just outside of Cloudburst, gave the ranch something else to think about. Bonzo didn't know anything about the Fourth of July, but he was actively interested in the preparations.

Ann Burnet was on some kind of a committee. Leaving Jimmy in the care of Charley, the cook, she rode away in the buckboard to help with the decorations at the Laird Ranch.

This was a big moment for Jimmy. With Charley too busy to watch him, he decided to go exploring. When he ventured out of the yard Bonzo was right behind him. Bonzo seemed to realize that something was wrong. Excitedly he tugged at Jimmy's clothes, trying to get him to go back to the ranch. But Jimmy was obdurate. Making the most of his freedom, he turned into the hills.

Jimmy and Bonzo had a four-hour start before they were missed by Charley. Ann and Dal Burnet received the bad news when they rode in from Cloudburst at dark. Soon the whole ranch turned out to scour the desert for a trace of Jimmy.

Dal Burnet, in his grief and excitement, could spare Charley from blame. But he couldn't excuse Bonzo.

"It's that dog," he cried. "We should never have let him come back. He's gone now and he's taken Jimmy with him. I'll shoot the cur on sight!"

No one argued with Dal. He was having too bad a time.

Daylight found Old Harvey poring over Jimmy's tracks leading away from the Box-B Ranch.

"Tell Dal we found somethin'," he told one of the riders. To Charley he said, "See them tracks of Jimmy's? If yuh look close you'll find that the pup's tracks are on top of the kid's."

"Yeah? What does that mean?"

"Means that it was Jimmy leading the pup away instead of the other way around. Looks to me like the pup was trying to hold Jimmy back." His old eyes narrowed. "I reckon I'd better ride with Dal."

Dal soon joined them with the other men. All were armed with rifles or shotguns.

"When yuh see that cur shoot to kill!" ordered Dal.

Old Harvey didn't say anything, but he managed to get up in front with Dal. The rest of the men spread out through Furnace Canyon as they moved up it. Old Harvey didn't have much trouble following Jimmy's tracks, which led straight on up the ravine. Once he saw the spread out prints of something much larger than a dog. He made no comment, but it made him hurry his footsteps.

Taking a natural path along the canyon wall, Old Harvey led the way. He stopped at a hump of sandstone, nodded up toward the left where a ravine branched from the main canyon.

"In there is where we run across Cheela's cubs," he told Dal.

"Huh!" Dal caught his arm. "Hurry man. Cheela might still be up here!" Then Dal drew in his breath sharply. His eyes dilated. His voice cracked. "Look, man!" he cried.

Old Harvey stared across the narrow ravine and gulped. His hairy old hand gripped the stock of his rifle.

On a shelf of rock lay Cheela, the mountain lioness. Her tail moved back and forth as she intently watched something directly below her. That something was Jimmy and Bonzo!

Jimmy, apparently unaware of the stalking death above, rubbed his eyes and whimpered. Bonzo looked on solemnly, his nose turning up into the air every once in a while to sniff.

DAL pushed his rifle forward, but Old Harvey pulled him back down below the rocks.

"Yuh can't do that, Dal. Even if yuh put a bullet through that lion's heart she'd have enough in her to kill the lad. Motion the other men to stay clear."

Dal crept back on the trail, motioned the other men to the ground. Then he rejoined Old Harvey. The big cat hadn't moved.

"I know these cats, Dal," Harvey whispered. "Get up here, take a bead on her, but don't shoot. The wind's from her and she'll have a hard time seein' us against this background. If she bends her knees to leap, yuh'll have to let her have it."

Both men had Cheela covered now. If the big cat had a way to retreat they might have scared her away. But the only way for her to get off the flat rock was to pass by Jimmy and Bonzo. Her

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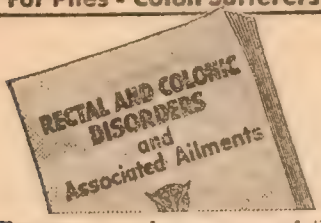

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wicked teeth, cruel claws would have made short work of both of them.

"Come on back, Jimmy!" whispered Dal, hoarsely. But his voice was so low it carried only a few feet. Old Harvey gripped his arm.

But Jimmy stood upright, climbed to the flat rock opposite that upon which Cheela stood. Bonzo leaped up beside Jimmy. His teeth caught hold of Jimmy's coat and it was apparent that he was trying to pull him away. Jimmy saw Cheela then. He began to scream.

Bonzo gave a sharp bark, ran back and forth looking at the big cat, then at Jimmy. Before the startled eyes of the two watching men, Bonzo leaped to the other ledge, and straight at Cheela.

"Take it easy, Dal," whispered Old Harvey. "A lion never turns down the bait of a live dog. Mebbe it'll save the lad." His hand tightened on his rifle and his eyes never left the spot on the lioness for which he was aiming.

Cheela did a strange thing then. She crouched back as if scared. She stuck out a big paw and bowled Bonzo over. Then she was biting his ears, licking his face.

Old Harvey grunted in amazement. In all the annals of lion hunting there was nothing like this. Then he came to life, gripped Dal by the arm.

"Quick, Dal, get down there and get yore kid. I'll keep Cheela covered."

Dal backed quickly down the slope. Crouching low he went running up the ravine. Jimmy saw him, slipped down from the rock and came toddling to meet him. Unseen by either Cheela or Bonzo on the ledge, Dal picked Jimmy up and ran down the ravine with him.

Dal was weak with relief when he climbed up on the trail again beside Old Harvey. The foreman gave Jimmy a playful pat on the leg.

"Nice work, Boss," he said. Waving a hand over to the other ledge, he raised up. "Take a look at them."

Dal squinted across the way. Cheela was stretched out full length now, playfully boxing Bonzo's ears. And Bonzo seemed to like it.

"What do yuh make of it?" Dal queried, still breathing hard.

"Easy," said the old foreman. "Cheela stole Bonzo when we stole her cubs. It shore explains where Bonzo was those four months he was missin'."

Jimmy suddenly stopped his soft sob-

bing and began to scream. "Bonzo! Bonzo!"

The cry swept across the gully, echoed. Bonzo heard that cry. He leaped away from the big cat, listened. He began to bark. In another instant he was off the ledge and dashing down the canyon.

HARVEY whistled and the little dog came leaping up the hillside.

"Don't be hard on him, Dal," admonished the foreman. "I shoulda told yuh —the tracks back there in the canyon showed that the lad was leadin' the dog, not the other way 'round."

But Dal was ready to defend Bonzo now.

He rubbed his ears.

"If it wasn't for Bonzo taking Cheela's eyes off Jimmy I could never have sneaked up there and got him!"

Harvey nodded. "Take a look at the big cat now."

Cheela stood up on the ledge, her head pointing down the ravine into which Bonzo had disappeared. She was magnificent as she stood there sniffing the wind. Outlined against the black rocks, she seemed like a statue carved out of yellow rock.

"What a target," whispered Riley, who had just come up. "Boss, better let me take it." He thrust his rifle out ahead of him.

"No!" cried Dal. "Nobody's shooting that lion!" Holding to Jimmy's hand, Dal stood upright then.

Cheela caught the movement and looked toward them. For an instant she stared at her old enemies. Then she wheeled gracefully, leaped down to the rocks upon which Jimmy had stood and out of sight. Her long, lithe body was just a yellow blur in the sunlight.

On the way out of the canyon, Dal insisted on carrying Jimmy on his shoulders and Bonzo under his arm. He mumbled under his breath. "If it wasn't for Bonzo the Burnet family wouldn't have much of a holiday tomorrow."

Old Harvey grinned. "And that's the reason yuh wouldn't let us shoot that lion, eh?"

"That's it," admitted Dal. "It kind of evens things up. Cheela could have killed Jimmy, but she didn't. Have the boys come back and blow up her den so she'll leave the country. But remember, no shooting." [*Turn page*]

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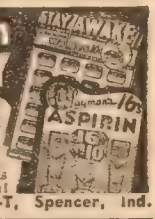

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Dal called over to Charley. "Charley, you old son-of-a-cook—you run on ahead and tell Ann she can start smiling again. And while yuh're at it, see if yuh can't cut out a ham bone for Bonzo!"

Bonzo reached up and licked Dal's face. He barked joyously over to Jimmy. It was pretty swell to be made over like this.

THE HOME CORRAL

(Continued from page 10)

more freely to the artificial fly than the Dolly Varden!"

If you must catch Dolly Varden, heave at it with a stout bait rod, casting reel and plenty of sinker. He'll go for far coarser tackle than the sportier trout. He's a bigger dunce than his close relative, the brookie.

The So-Called Lake Trout

The Dolly's scientific appellation, in case you're interested, is *salvelinus parkei*. He's native to the West, the brookie is native to the East. And now the

MACKINAW TROUT—He's the so-called lake trout and properly is listed under a different family name than *salmo* or *salvelinus*. This big walloper called *Christivomer* is usually caught by very deep trolling or still fishing, sometimes with copper wire instead of line. In lakes, only small specimens are taken on fly. And they rise so seldom that they are seldom fished for this way.

But taking up residence in rivers, the Mackinaw occasionally offers good surface-fishing sport. Experienced fishermen tell me that in the late fall, on the Madison River in the Yellowstone area of Montana, the Mackinaw make a fine rise. I must admit I've never been present on such an occasion, though in several of the crater lakes of the Oregon Cascades I've raised Mackinaw while fly-fishing for rainbow and silversides.

There is no way that I know of identifying this fish by its markings, because they vary more widely than those of any other trout. It has a long, flat head, similar to the Dolly Varden's. But the tail is sharply forked, and the adipose fin, near the base of the tail, is small while the Dolly's is large and fleshy.

The Mackinaw is both spotted and mottled from snout to caudal tip and the spots are sometimes red. The body color actually ranges from black to white.

A Lord of Western Rivers

That finishes up our first series of the seven typical trout. Now let's take up the lesser-known forms and the troutlike fishes. First of all comes that lord of western rivers, the

STEELHEAD TROUT—Here's the toughest, strongest and fastest of them all. He's a seagoing rainbow whose flesh and outline closely resembles the Pacific salmon, and in some tidal streams the steelhead is almost as large.

I've hooked 30-inch steelhead in fast water

on the north Umpqua on a frail leader and No. 8 fly. I'll leave it to your imagination, hombres and hombresses, what happened. We parted company in a hurry.

A heap of confusion exists about the steelhead. One of the most noted ichthyologists, David Starr Jordan, maintained for a long time that the steelhead and rainbow were different fish. He took this stand in the face of overwhelming sport lore that held them to be the same.

It got to be quite a feud and ended, according to the story I've always heard, when a Klamath River fisherman caught a steelhead, just up from salt water, and imprisoned him in a fresh-water tank. At the same time he took a fresh-water rainbow and turned him into a salt-water tank.

The rainbow became a silvery-scaled steelhead. And the steelhead regained its trout rainbow stripe and spots. The fisherman reversed the procedure and brought the fish back to their original state! Then he invited the famous Dr. Jordan up Klamath way to witness the phenomena.

I can't vouchsafe the truth of this yarn. But this much is fact. Science has altered its earlier views about the steelhead and now regard it as a species of rainbow, *salmo rivularis*.

Here's the long and short of it: no trout is a steelhead until it visits salt water where it takes on the salmonlike sheen and sturdiness of the deep sea. Yet you hear uninformed fishermen say:

"Yeah, they've planted Lake So-and-So with *steelhead!*"

Be they captured sea-run fish or their spawn, any stock returned to land-locked

[*Turn page*]

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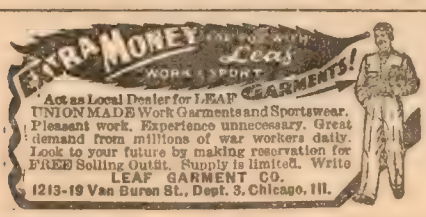

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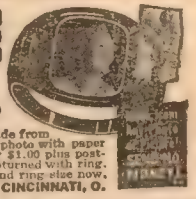

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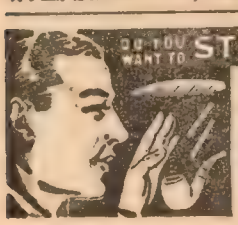

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water becomes rainbow, nothing else. The point can be proved by efforts of Oregon authorities to introduce fish in the Rogue River that wouldn't gallivant off to sea just as they grew to catching size. So they planted Utah rainbow stock. What happened? The Utah rainbow high-tailed for the ocean when they got to be about eight inches long, same as any other rainbow.

It is the nature of trout to make for any large body of water. A reservoir created by damming a river, such as Lake Crowley on the upper Owens River in California, invariably attracts fish so as to deplete the supply above.

The Sea-Run Cutthroat

I have much more to tell you about steelhead later, but we mustn't keep these other fish waiting in the introduction lineup, such as the

HARVEST TROUT—This is only one of several local names for the sea-run cutthroat. They do not travel so far as the sea-run rainbow, which are found a thousand miles or more from tidewater. They inhabit, for the most part, the short coastal rivers of Oregon and Washington.

I catalogue them separately from the non-migrating cutthroat stock to be consistent with my method of classification, which I told you earlier is a description of a fish's appearance, habits and distribution.

In gameness and power the cutthroat benefits by his ocean voyages, the same as the sea-run rainbow or steelhead. But he doesn't grow nearly as large. After a journey in salt water, the flesh of this fish, same as the steelhead, turns almost as red as the salmon's, and much the same rich flavor.

Of course, inland fish often are red-fleshed, or pink, particularly in lakes where a small crustacea called fresh-water shrimp is an important article of food.

And here's something for studious folks to ponder on. The brook trout out West never goes to sea. But those on the Atlantic seaboard do, I'm told. Why?

We have another exotic or introduced fish in western waters, having been brought from England via Michigan, which has taken a firm foothold in our more northern streams, such as the Gallatin River of Montana and White River in northwestern Colorado. It is the

GRAYLING—Long, roundish and gray-scaled, this splendid game fish might be mistaken for a sucker, except for the remarkable plumetlike dorsal fin, which is bright and with peacock-colored spots. The grayling loves fast riffles and hits a fly with the force of a rainbow and rivals the latter for a stirring finish fight.

In England, where the grayling is an important sport fish and known as *thymallus vulgaris*, fly fishermen know him well. But on account of limited distribution on this continent, he's perhaps the least-known and most seldom-encountered of all fresh-water fish.

He is therefore not studied as closely as the trout. But it has been noted that he takes on several variant forms, the more pronounced when introduced in high north-country lakes, such as in Yellowstone Park.

Under western conditions, the grayling is

found generally in larger waters inhabited by the native—

WHITEFISH—A species of chub, seldom growing to more than 12 or 15 inches in length, and not greatly prized by sportsmen, but a one-time important food fish for the Indians and early settlers. The meat, being oily, smokes or dries well, but is less flavorful than that of the trout.

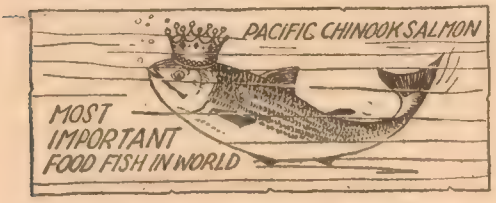
The whitefish has a small, smeltlike mouth, delicate and membraneous, but he will hit a fly unerringly. To the annoyance of river fishermen out for bigger game. They are not encouraged and artificially propagated, yet appear by uncountable thousands in such rivers as the Yellowstone, upper Columbia, Snake and its more important tributaries; Fraser, Flathead and upper Missouri.

Big Game

The whitefish is fairly game and when hooked behaves much the same as a trout. The little jasper isn't to be scorned. Now let's turn our attention to the big game of western waters—

SILVERSIDE, JACK SALMON, CHINOOK—These three of the numerous family of Pacific salmon I classify because they are the principal ones caught on light tackle. But they vary in appearance, habits and distribution.

The silverside, also called coho, is our principal land-locked salmon. State fisheries have



introduced him in inland lakes where he is a fair but erratic fly-taker. This bright, slender fish has a deeply forked tail, attains a weight of 30 pounds in salt water, but grows about one-third that size away from the sea.

The jack is the outlaw of the salmon tribe. Actually, he is a chinook that ascends the rivers from Monterey Bay north to Alaska ahead of that cycle which Nature has decreed. In other words, he comes not to spawn and die, but to prey on the ova and young of his kind.

He appears in tidal rivers when the usual salmon run is absent and is always voraciously hungry, in contrast to regular run salmon which rarely eat after leaving tidewater. An average specimen runs from five to ten pounds. On minnows, spinner or spoon he's a battler, but flies he ignores.

The chinook, most important food fish in the world, is the so-called Columbia River salmon that grows to sixty-pound size. Along river estuaries and tidal basins he paused in his upward migration in "tempering water," part salt, part fresh.

Here he is the quarry of light-tackle fishermen using lures, who greet the annual run as far inland as central southern Idaho, on the Salmon River and some tributaries.

[*Turn page*]

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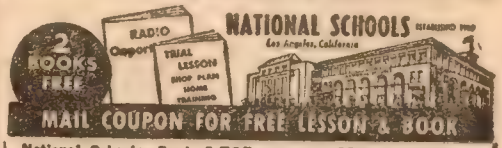

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OUR NEXT ISSUE

BONNIE BRADFORD was Queen of Bronc Busters and Champion Cowgirl until she was badly injured by being thrown from an outlaw horse. It took Bonnie five years to recover her health back on her father's Box B cattle ranch.

When Bonnie's father, Big Jim Bradford, fired a tough guntoter named Flynn from the ranch, that was the beginning of the trouble. Before many hours passed Big Jim was dead, killed by a bullet from a drygulcher's rifle. It was when Bonnie found her grief almost too much to bear that Jim Lord, from Hildalgo way, came into her life.

Hub Crandall, the ranch foreman, hinted that Jim Lord might have drygulched Bradford but Bonnie didn't want to believe that. The hard-boiled Box B crew that the foreman had hired had different ideas on the subject and Jim Lord had a fight on his hands until Bonnie used her authority as owner of the spread to stop it.

Bonnie becomes enmeshed in tense drama and emotional conflict in the exciting featured novelet in the next issue—RENEGADE RANGE, by Ed Earl Repp.

In the same issue—THE HORSE-HOLDER, by Wes Fargo. A powerful novelet in which those grim riders of the owlhoot trail take the stage—the ruthless outlaws of the rangeland.

Buck was young—and he thought that riding with the wild bunch was the only way to live. It was a new member of the gang who taught Buck that there were other and better things in life than the boy had ever known. What happened before Buck learns his lesson makes THE HORSE-HOLDER a novelet to remember.

THE CIRCLE 7 CRIME, by Tom Gunn, is an exciting Painted Post novelet coming next issue. When someone tries to kill Pete Crowley of the Circle 7 outfit by leaving a

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live Gila monster in his bunk while the waddy is sleeping, Sheriff Blue Steele and Shorty Watts go into action.

They find plenty of trouble before they finally get things cleared up. It's a good yarn of the two fighting lawmen at their best, and when Steele and Shorty get into a battle they don't pull their punches.

There will also be a number of swiftly-paced shorter stories, filled with the valiant spirit of the cattle country, in the next issue of POPULAR WESTERN. Old Doc Trail will be on hand with some more interesting chatter and all in all, it will be a gala number chock-full of good reading.

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We always are eager to have our readers' opinions and suggestions, so be sure that you write and tell us what you like about the magazine and what you don't like. Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, POPULAR WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Here's an excerpt from an interesting letter from a lady in Texas:

In my younger days when I began reading magazines I always chose the Western stories as my father enjoyed them more than any other reading matter and always left his copies close at hand. Whenever Mother wanted to punish me by sending me to my room or a quiet corner I would always snitch a book to take along and the punishment I suffered was terrible—terribly exciting and thrilling. More so than getting into mischief with my pals. Now I put my own children to sleep by reading them Western stories—and I enjoy them as much as they do.—*Mrs. Katherine Howard, Elmendorf, Texas.*

We enjoyed your letter, Mrs. Howard. Thank you for writing.

I have been reading POPULAR WESTERN for some time and like all the stories. I particularly enjoyed FISTS AND GUNS and SANTA FE TRAIL RACE. —*Alleone Brown, Alexander City, Ala.*

Thanks for your letter. Glad you like the magazine so well.

Here's a kick and a boost. I like POPULAR WESTERN—and enjoy most of the stories in every issue—but I don't think so much of Buffalo Billy Bates. I just can't go for those long-haired heroes. Sheriff Blue Steele is the kind of salty hombre I like. —*Fred Dawson, Chicago, Ill.*

A lot of our other readers don't agree with your opinion of Buffalo Billy Bates—but a letter like yours pleases us, for we want to know just what our readers think about the magazine.

Let's hear from more of you readers. Thanks, everybody. See you next issue.

—THE EDITOR.

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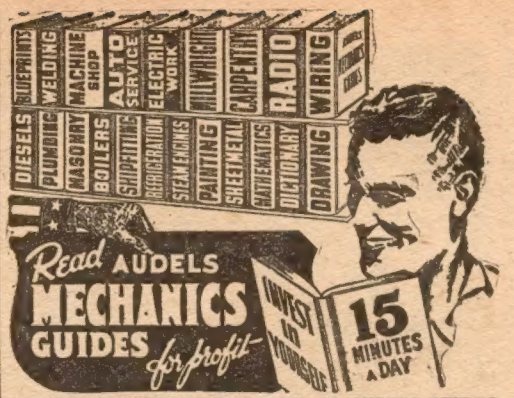

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